



A Comedy OF Manners

WITH MONICA ALI

REVIEWED BY RUBY CONWAY

Monica Ali's long-awaited novel *Love Marriage* is every bit as propulsive, witty, and richly entertaining as you could hope a novel to be. Yasmin Ghorami is a junior doctor, soon to be married to a charming fellow doctor, Joe Sangster. The Ghoramis, all living under one roof, are firmly moulded by the expectations of their Baba, Shaokat, and enraptured by their parents' love marriage; meanwhile, Joe is his mother's closest confidant, their relationship revealed at its most discomfiting by her perpetual walk-ins on Joe's showering – with no outcry from him.

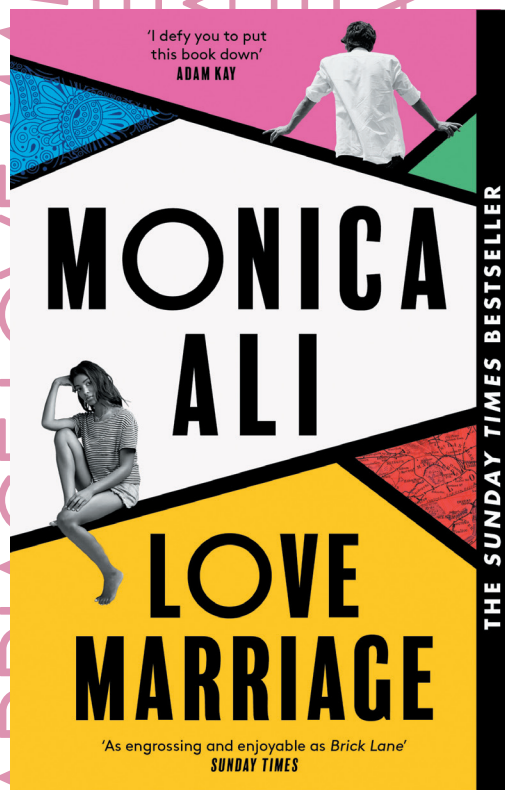
The fraught family units and accompanying illusions begin to crumble when the Sangsters and the Ghoramis are brought together for the first time over containers of Anisah Ghorami's long-laboured-over 'shukto, alu dom, dal pakori, kachori', in the artsy and opulent Primrose Hill abode of liberal feminist writer Harriet Sangster, still known for an iconic nude photo taken of her in the 70s. Yasmin is gripped by anxiety – her parents more traditional and less literate than those Harriet usually engages with.

A culture hijack would be an apt term to describe what happens next. Ali dances on a tightrope between humour and agony, as Harriet's overbearing

mothering and cringeworthy cultural fetishization commandeer all wedding plans. Soon, the respective mothers are talking details and forging a close bond which neither Yasmin nor Joe expected; Harriet is setting the wheels in motion for Anisah's feminist awakening. The cultures begin to merge, in a somewhat excruciating way.

Over the following months, through family dramas, intergenerational rows, and a tangled coming together of the Ghoramis and Sangsters, a whole host of issues, scandals, secrets, and parental expectations are brought bubbling to the surface; truths unfurl rapidly, and an emotional explosion is imminent in a complex series of subplots – all set against the backdrop of Brexit, the NHS, and problematic cultural attitudes.

Parents become more than parents, sex more than sex, and intergenerational expectations implode. Ali's writing cuts to the core of human relationships, mottled as they are with human flaws, learnt behaviours, and childhood demons. Between hospital wards, therapy rooms and kitchens, every one of the characters is searching for self-realisation and redemption, and it appears as though it may take drastic measures for them to get there.



Firstly, how did the idea of tangling these two families together in *Love Marriage* come to you? And with the gap between this and your last novel, I wondered whether this book has been in the works for a long period of time?

To answer the first part of your question, I was actually working on two different stories initially, so I had a story about Yasmin, a young doctor, in love with a fellow junior doctor, etc. And then I had a completely separate story about Harriet, although she wasn't called Harriet at the time – this sort of North London, literary luvvie, firebrand feminist, and her entirely separate world. I wasn't really sure whether either story was going to take, whether which one, if either, was going to turn into a novel.

I find moments like this rare in writing because the writing is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration, but this was one of those 1% moments where I thought – it was like a light bulb going off – 'What if I put them together? Intermesh these two stories in some way?'. And at that point, I thought, 'Okay, this, this is going to be a lot of fun to write'. And then it felt like the story I had to write.

And then I just wrote and wrote and wrote, and I ended up with 240,000 words, which was not my usual process. In my previous books, I'd write quite a tight first draft, because I edit a lot as I go along, so that worried me. I knew I was writing too much, and I knew I would need to cut it, but actually, when it came to the cutting, it was totally fine. It wasn't the painful process that I expected, actually. The bones of the story were solid and it all, thankfully, worked out. So that's something about the genesis of the story.

Love Marriage took about four years to write, partly because I couldn't stop writing, and also, there was quite a lot of research that went into it. All the hospital scenes for example – it's not a medical drama, but there are certain parts of the hospital that I needed to do a lot of research on to get the setting and the medical stuff right. So, the combination of those things meant that it did take quite a long time to get to the end.

When the writing is just flowing in that way, do you feel like it's less self-conscious? Do you come back to it less aware of what you've written, or is the writing still considered?

I think it's a mixture; I think there are times when I just needed to get something down and it was less controlled than usual. I worried about it a lot during the process, actually, because I kept thinking, 'This is not my process. And this is not how I do it.' But I think what I learned from it was that it's not about my process, it's about each particular book coming out in a different way. And I found that it was just the way that I needed to do this one, and I could do some of the shaping and the cutting later on.

And in terms of self-consciousness, there's always a level of that, and I think that's really interesting and fundamental. There's always a sort of ying and yang for me because, on one level, I need to be fully submerged – people talk about being in a flow state, and there can be hours that just fly by when I'm not really conscious of the passing of time because I'm deeply submerged in the fictional world I'm creating. The controls are off in a way. But, on the other hand, when putting together something of novel length, whether it's 100,000 or 200,000 words, there is also that more analytical, jigsaw puzzle type of work that you're doing, because the structure also has to work. So, I think those two things are always hand in hand and one would come to the fore and then recede; it's always a push and pull between those two factors, I think.

That makes sense. At first, when you begin reading the novel, you think it's going to be this culture clash, but then it delves so much deeper than that. You've got the white liberalism knocking up against the merging of the Ghoramis and Sangsters, as well as similarities between the families coming to the fore. How did you want to get beyond a culture clash story and do it a bit differently?

You know, I have seen it described in terms of a culture clash, which, to me is just... I agree with you, I think it's a completely bollocks way of describing it! At the very opening, Yasmin has a fear of a culture clash – if you look closely at Yasmin's fears, they're partly founded on that anxiety, but as much as anything else, they're also to do with a class anxiety because her parents are middle class and her dad's a doctor, but Joe's family, Harriet, is very posh and wealthy, so there's a class anxiety there. And there's also an anxiety that I think lots of us, growing up or in young adulthood, or even

later in some cases, feel around our own families being embarrassing – that our family is not normal and that everyone else's family is normal.

That is then overlaid with things that I suppose you could put into the potential culture clash bucket, but it's much more layered. And then none of that actually transpires, it's just Yasmin's initial fear, but actually, Harriet, as you've pointed out, is very keen to take the Ghoramis into her bosom, especially Anisah – those two get on far too well for Yasmin's liking. I think that's the basis for some of the comedy, that undercutting of expectation – she fears one thing, and then the complete opposite happens. And that's worse than the thing that she feared in one way, and she starts to resent Harriet and Anisah's relationship.

That leads really nicely onto my next question because the theme for this issue is Light, and one of the ways we're looking at this theme is through light-hearted literature. You seem to use humour to approach tense and difficult situations, particularly at the beginning of the book, and then as things get more complicated, the humour seems to seep away, as other aspects take over. So, I was wondering, how did you hope humour would function in *Love Marriage*?

I guess that there is an element in the book that's a sort of comedy of manners, with the two families coming together, isn't there? I think the humour does run through the book, but certainly some of the issues that are being confronted by Yasmin, Anisah, and Joe, and the rest of them, are quite dark and difficult at times. So, I think the tone does become more serious as the tensions ramp up and as the issues become more serious. But I hope that, even though it deals with lots of difficult shit, at its heart, it's pretty optimistic.

And I do think it's quite a light book in some senses – not light as in light reading, but it's hopeful, and it's got that lightness in the ending, and there is a sense of balance between the light and the dark.

Yes. And I think fundamentally, it's got an optimistic view of human nature, even though these people are complicated and have some quite serious flaws.

Yes, it's very forgiving.

Those moments of discomfort are where you've got to keep pushing on, and not let yourself off the hook."

For example, Shaokat is the epitome of a flawed character, but he's got lots of good sides. Harriet too – I suppose some readers might be tempted initially to dismiss her as an example of white privilege and nothing else, but actually, Harriet's got a really good heart. You know, she might be annoying in lots of ways, but I think she sort of redeems herself. I mean, to my mind she does anyway. So, I think I'm always playing with that, balancing the dark and the light, as you said.

I also think that a lot of the humour is about your own relationship to the joke, and it often crosses into a line where it's more uncomfortable than funny. For me at least, I found that with the dinner scene – when Harriet is being mocked and then she starts to initiate the Muslim wedding idea – it started to get uncomfortable. But maybe people react differently depending on the expectations and ideas they bring to the reading.

To my mind, there's a lot of humour to be found in those moments that can also be quite excruciating. And I think a lot of the best comedy is based in those moments of partly making you wince.

Do you enjoy making the reader wince?

Of course, yes! Whether it's in a serious way, or whether it's in a comedic way, I think those moments of discomfort are where you've got to keep pushing on, and not let yourself off the hook.

For sure. What do you think about *Love Marriage* being categorised as a romantic comedy? Perhaps not a conventional romcom, but even though there is a kind of reconciliation at the end of the novel, it feels like a more complex, slightly darker romantic comedy?

I suppose romcom has certain connotations: they're frivolous, not realistic – it's a Hollywood type of scenario. I'd like to think those don't apply, but it is a 'will they, won't they', which is a bedrock of romantic comedies. So, in that sense, you could definitely draw an analogy. You know, one of my favourite writers is Jane Austen and she, of course, constantly used marriage

plots and engagement plots, and she's a very funny writer as well; she uses dramatic irony to great comic effect, so there's a very long tradition of doing that. And I think through that lens of the supposedly quite narrow domestic sphere, or the love story, it's possible to both get the drama and the comedy value of the central love story. And also, you can show a lot about society at the same time, as Jane Austen does. So, I'd like to think that I can have my cake and eat it in that sense.

***Love Marriage* seems to suggest that romantic relationships are predetermined by your family relationships and continue to be determined by your family as you move into adulthood. Is this something you believe in or have felt in your life? It really rang true for me.**

Do you mean determined by your family in a therapy sense?

Yes, in a therapy sense. I guess I was thinking a lot about attachment styles in childhood, how popular that term has become, and how it affects all our adulthood relationships. Is that something you believe in?

I think it's almost inevitably, inextricably linked; the way that we grow up and the way we're conditioned by the family environments which we either enjoy or endure can determine how we then evolve into our own relationships. The choices are either for you to emulate the role-modelling that you've seen, or you reject it, but either way, it's still conditioning you in some way. I think that's almost certainly true.

Is that something you were reading around when researching for the book?

I've read a lot, particularly around the therapy scenes, or around addiction and so on, and I've been in therapy myself. So, you know, that's something – not for sex addiction, I have to state. So, yeah, I took something both from experience and from research.

I loved the therapy scenes, and I kept thinking, 'Why don't people do this more in books?'

I also wanted to talk to you about the book's focus on sex. Yasmin starts to worry about her chasteness, and embarks on an affair, Anisah enters into a relationship with a new woman, and there's even covert incest. What did you want to reveal about sex, beyond it being very complicated? Or in retrospect, why do you think sex is at the heart of it all?

Well in narrative terms, it is what moves the novel along. And there's not a sex scene on every other page, there's two sex scenes, but you're right, sex is often pivotal to a turning point in the plot – whether that's an unplanned pregnancy or issues of sexual violence or sexual preference or sex addiction, it's often the turning point. And I guess there are a couple of things here: one is just that sex naturally lends itself very easily to dramatic turning points. It can easily give rise to conflict or competing interests, and so on. Another thing is that sex is a universal, whether you want it or don't want it.

I mean, Harriet, for instance, although she's known for her views on sex, she's actually celibate and has been for a number of years. But it's universal, so it's one thing that can string together these very different families. It's a thread on which all of these beads can be strung, and although the beads are all different, it functions as a sort of through line for all of them. And for Yasmin and the journey she goes on, it is a fundamental part of her growing up, in a way. It forces her to face some fundamental questions about who she is and what she wants, and the ways she is free to explore her desires or suppress her desires, or otherwise.

Were you keen to reveal the complexity of the parents' sex lives in equal measure to that of the younger characters, and to have them all on the same level? Because I feel like sex, almost especially for a Anisah, turns her from just being a mother into a full person. Culturally, the focus tends to be so much more on young people.

Yes, I definitely did. And it's part of, as you say, Yasmin making that transition from Anisah as just Ma in the kitchen cooking to, 'Oh, my God, she's

an actual real person.' That, again, is part of growing up, isn't it? I mean, those issues and questions don't actually go away as you get older; they're less central to the drama of your life, but they're there and they're in your history, and they're there in your present. So that's definitely something I wanted to do.

Do you have any particular favourite comedies or romance novels?

For comic novels, I immediately think of Jane Austen because of her razor-sharp wit, and my favourite is *Emma*. The book that makes me laugh out loud every time I re-read it is *A House for Mr Biswas* by V.S. Naipaul – the best tragicomedy ever written. For romance, my taste leans towards the epic and tragic – *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* are at the top of the list. In a happier vein, *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

And is there anything you can tell us about the TV adaptation of *Love Marriage*? Who would be in your dream cast?

It's at that stage of newness development hell! I don't know yet, but I mean Gillian Anderson would be really good as Harriet...

Oh yeah, she'd be great.

I was thinking Ambika Mod would be good as Yasmin; she was in *This is Going to Hurt*, the Adam Kay book adaptation. But I haven't really given it any thought because I don't want to get ahead of myself.

And then my last question, which is something we ask every author we speak to, is do you judge a book by its cover?

I guess I probably do; there are certain covers that would put me off. I mean, if I'd heard great things about a book from a friend, for instance, and it was a crap cover, I still would buy it. But a great cover can definitely attract you to a book and a really crap one can put you off if you're just browsing, for sure. I'm loathe to admit that, but it's true. I do love the cover for *Love Marriage* though, it's a really strong cover.