The Multicultural Bildungsroman: Stereotypes in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane

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Abstract
Monica Ali’s phenomenally popular debut novel Brick Lane has often been accused of reinforcing rather than challenging stereotypes of cultural otherness. Interestingly, literary critics who have championed the novel have not sought to deny that it employs stereotypes, but rather to emphasize its sense of knowing irony in doing so. Critically analysing debates which have attempted to assert that Brick Lane either propagates or ironically subverts cultural stereotypes, this article scrutinizes the valency of the kinds of “postmodern” readings of the novel which have thus far prevailed. I argue that the major concern of the novel is not the destabilization of stereotypes but the celebration of the potential for adaptation in both individuals and societies. I argue that Ali employs stereotypes as counterpoints in order to further emphasize her protagonist’s final integration into contemporary British society, and that the novel might usefully be understood as a “multicultural Bildungsroman”.

Keywords
Monica Ali, Brick Lane, postcolonial British fiction, stereotypes, multiculturalism, Bildungsroman

It is perhaps something of a surprise that of a wealth of recent novels that deal with the experiences of Asian immigrants to Britain, Monica Ali’s Brick Lane has become one of the most controversial. Hardly the most obviously subversive postcolonial British novel to have been published
since the millennium, its immense popularity within the literary main-
stream has gone some way towards its being perceived as an iconic work
and, in turn, heightening sensitivities towards its representations of cultural
difference. In addition, conflicts over the novel’s conversion to film on the
street from which it takes its title have attracted high-profile voices such as
Germaine Greer’s and Salman Rushdie’s to the debates surrounding
it, and the British media has seized upon this as a means to make, yet
again, the tired association with the infamous “Rushdie affair”.

As has been the case with almost every contemporary British novel
that deals with the experiences of South Asian migrants to London, Brick
Lane has repeatedly been compared to The Satanic Verses, and yet – as
Alistair Cormack has shown in his recent formal analysis of Ali’s novel\(^1\) –
the two are strikingly dissimilar works of fiction. Moreover, the debates
which the two have provoked are just as dissimilar. While it is certainly
reductive (misleading, even) to consider the furore over Rushdie’s novel
to be a case of “respect for religious sensibilities” versus “free speech”, the
debates surrounding Ali’s novel do not even invite this easy binary to
be drawn. Rather, Ali has been accused of propagating stereotypes
about Bangladeshi communities in both London and Bangladesh and,
in response, has vociferously denounced the “burden of representation”
that she feels has been thrust upon her novel, stressing that it is the story
of a particular family rather than a portrayal of a whole ethnic or cul-
tural group. However, that Brick Lane actively courts such “burdensome”
representation cannot be in doubt. One need only consider the novel’s
title to see that it finds the prospect of representing, or perhaps even
“unveiling”, a particular community rather attractive.

While literary critics have largely (and perhaps wisely) shied away
from a media debate which has described the novel either as “accurately”
representing or as grossly commodifying cultural otherness, those who
champion it have not sought to deny that it employs stereotypes but
rather to emphasize its sense of knowing irony in doing so. This is a telling
reflection of the kinds of interpretive framework in which the novel
has been read. With particular attention to the question of translation,
this article critically analyses debates which have attempted to assert
that Brick Lane either propagates or ironically subverts cultural stereo-
types. Scrutinizing the valency of the kinds of postmodern readings
of Brick Lane which have thus far prevailed, I argue that the major
concern of the novel is not the destabilization of stereotypes but the
celebration of integration; the veneration of the potential for adaptation
in both individuals and societies. I argue that Ali employs stereotypes as
aesthetic counterpoints in order to further emphasize her protagonist’s
final integration into contemporary British society, and that the novel
might usefully be understood as a “multicultural Bildungsroman”.

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What is ultimately at stake in the debates surrounding *Brick Lane* is an understanding of the ways in which particular kinds of representations of cultural otherness in contemporary British literature have come to be considered as either “progressive” or as “reductive”; of the ways in which a particular configuration of “progressiveness” itself within critical discourse has proved an obstacle to, rather than a means of, reading contemporary postcolonial texts.

Even favourable reviews of *Brick Lane* have voiced anxiety over the novel’s portrayal of Hasina, the sister of the protagonist Nazneen, whose letters from Bangladesh are reproduced in the narrative. Many have worried that her character very much constitutes a stereotype, and indeed her letters recount a life of such singular, unending misery that it is difficult to see her as anything more than a symbol of subjugation. Suffering seems to await Hasina at every juncture, and her faith that Allah will “show her the way” is repeatedly portrayed as blind naivety. Defying her parents to enter a “love marriage”, she is rejected by her family, abused by a succession of men and forced into prostitution; even when it appears that she has found sanctuary working as a maid in a wealthy household, she is still unable to escape violence and oppression. Interestingly, all of the letters are presented in broken, grammatically poor English. For example, speaking of going to hospital to visit Monju, a friend who has been savagely attacked by members of her own family, one of the letters reads:

> Cheek and mouth is melt and ear have gone like dog chew off. [...] It is her husband who have done this with brother and sister. Brother and sister hold tight and husband pour acid over head face and body. All over is infection on body and smell make it difficult for people to go near.\(^2\)

This pidgin English (or “english”) idiom which the letters employ has caused much confusion among literary critics. Michela Canepari Labib, for example, takes the view that “in fact, Hasina can speak and write in English”; that she actually writes the letters in this broken English and that the narrative simply reproduces them faithfully.\(^3\) While she does comment on how unlikely it is that Hasina would be able to speak or write English at all – as well as the further improbability that, even if she could, she would choose to use it in letters to her sister, a fellow native speaker of Bengali – Canepari Labib takes the language and idiom of the letters as a problem of verisimilitude rather than as an indication of their having been translated by the narrative from Bengali. Somewhat more helpfully, Alistair Cormack observes the ambiguity of the issue:

> Without any account by the narrator, it is hard to know exactly what we are reading – whether the letters represent inept attempts at English or are a free translation from illiterate Bengali.\(^4\)
Cormack comes out in favor of the latter being more likely, and indeed it seems much more probable that this is the case. Shortly before the narrative reproduces the first of Hasina’s letters, we are told that “Nazneen could say two things in English: sorry and thank you” (p. 14). If this is the case, she would be unable to read any letter composed in English, pidgin or otherwise. Taking the letters as being translated, then, we can begin to explore the implications of this narrative translation. In a subsequent letter, Hasina again attempts to describe her friend Monju’s injuries: “Acid melt cheekbone and nose and one eye. Other eye damage only with pain and very hate. Difficult thing how I make you describe?” (p. 317). The question that Hasina herself poses here is one that is central to the novel’s account of her: how to describe such difficult things? The broken English in which the letters are presented seems to be an attempt to answer this question, a formal representation of the vulnerability and helplessness that characterize Hasina’s life in Bangladesh as well as those of other unfortunates around her. Indeed, Hasina’s condition is so impossibly helpless that Nazneen repeatedly finds herself unable to compose responses to her sister; attempting to reply to a letter about Monju, for example, Nazneen imagines herself giving news of her family and simply concludes “What a poor answer it would make” (p. 316).

During a section of the novel in which Nazneen is recovering from a nervous breakdown, her husband Chanu takes to speaking to her using the third-person: “She will not overdo it,’ he said. Whenever he wanted to emphasize her fragility, he put her at this linguistic remove” (p. 282). Similarly, the “linguistic remove” that the narrative puts Hasina at by translating the letters into broken English seeks to emphasize her fragility. Only once does the narrative translate a sequence of Hasina’s sentences into standard English and, significantly, it is at this specific moment that her condition is stated most plainly: “I am a low woman. I am nothing. I have nothing. I am all that I have. I can give you nothing” (p. 140). So unfamiliar is the grammatically flawless idiom here that particular attention is drawn to the moment, emphasizing the simplicity and “authenticity” of this declaration of “nothingness”.

*Brick Lane*’s depiction of Hasina’s life has been accused of propagating rather than challenging stereotypical notions of the oppression of women in postcolonial Islamic societies. Moreover, in formal terms the letters run the further risk of equating linguistic deviations from “Englishness” with cultural primitiveness, with the idiomatic struggle played out problematically representing failure to escape from barbarity and persecution. Indeed, the grasp of English which Nazneen develops over the course of the novel occurs simultaneously with – and seems almost synonymous with – her move towards independence and
liberation. While such problems with the novel have certainly left it open to charges of reinforcing and commodifying pre-existing stereotypes, it should be acknowledged that the text does make occasional reference to instances of otherness being knowingly constructed and commodified. Chanu, for example, explains to Nazneen that the presence of Hindu effigies in Brick Lane restaurants is not indicative of the arrival of a new cultural group in the area, but of the ongoing commodification of cultural difference there: “‘Not Hindus. Marketing. Biggest God of all.’ The white people liked to see the gods. ‘For authenticity,’ said Chanu” (p. 373). In addition, attention is sometimes drawn to cultural performative – most obviously with Karim, whose decision to suddenly start wearing traditional Islamic dress is fittingly described as a “new style” (p. 313), and with Chanu, whose opinions regarding how his daughters should dress and act change daily according to the propaganda that he happens to have been reading:

> If he had a Lion Hearts leaflet in his hand, he wanted his daughters covered. He would not be cowed by these Muslim-hating peasants. If he saw some girls go by in hijab he became agitated at this display of peasant ignorance. Then the girls went out in their skirts. (p. 219)

Perhaps most significantly, the performative of cultural identities and the exoticization of otherness is emphasized by Nazneen’s realization at the end of the novel that she and Karim have “made each other up”; that, to him, she is “the real thing” simply because she represents “[a]n idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her” (p. 380). *Brick Lane* does, then, demonstrate – and to a degree actively encourage – some suspicion of the ways in which otherness is constructed and represented. However, whether it can be said to draw attention to its own constructedness – and if, in doing so, it destabilizes its own representations of cultural difference – is a more problematic question.

Addressing the issue of the stereotypical nature of Hasina’s character, Jane Hiddleston argues for reading *Brick Lane* as a postmodern, self-reflexive novel. She notes that:

reservations towards the letters are valid, and Hasina’s character is undoubtedly a little unsubtle in its collusion with Western preconceptions of women’s subjugation under Islam. Since Ali’s text is a work of literature, however, and since at other times the author deliberately undermines mythologized depictions of “the Eastern other”, it is worth considering not only the “accuracy” of the letters but also their implications as a literary device. Indeed, perhaps Ali’s text can be read not as a “faithful” transcript of any “exemplary” letter-writing but rather as a forum where myths circulating around both cultures are exposed in order to provoke the reader. The stock images of Hasina’s letters are themselves testimony to the pervasiveness of such stereotypes in Bangladesh as well as
in Britain, and their inclusion in a novel such as this forces us to consider the difficulty of attempting to free any representation of cultural identity from their influence.5

Certainly the letters must be recognized as a literary device, and their apparent crudity often disguises sophisticated textual strategies; most notably, their consistent use of the present tense when describing past events lends an immediacy to Hasina’s descriptions of traumatic experiences. However, to claim that the inclusion of the letters “in a novel such as this” forces the reader to reflect on the difficulties of freeing representations of cultural identity from the stereotypical relies upon a particular formulation of “a novel such as this”. The question then becomes, what sort of novel is Brick Lane? In Hiddleston’s account, it is presumed to be a tangibly postmodern text – a “forum”, indeed – whose metatextuality absolves it from (or perhaps even makes it exempt from) charges of cultural commodification. For Hiddleston, the text’s apparent complicity with the propagation of stereotypes can only be knowingly ironic, since this deems it progressively provocative rather than reductively formulaic. In its admirable attempt to deconstruct a debate which has framed the novel as either “authentic” or “commodified”, and in seeking to demonstrate complexity in its relationship with notions such as authenticity and commodification, Hiddleston’s account privileges narrative self-reflexivity and overstates the “postmodern” aesthetics of what is, formally, a strikingly traditional text.

While Hiddleston’s account of Brick Lane has offered the most “postmodern” reading of it to date, she is not alone in attempting to find ways in which to read the letters as provocative rather than simply stereotypical. Canepari Labib, for example – who, as above, mistakenly reads the letters as actually being written in English by Hasina – suggests that their idiom “could be understood as an attempt to dislocate, both syntactically and lexically, the language of the former [colonial] master, exploiting the potential of local idioms and “Other” cultural referents”.6 She goes on to argue that the letters indicate that the novel “tries to question received conceptions of culture and to develop the debate on language at the core of postcolonial theoretical and fictional production”.7

Citing moments in the text when the narrative describes Nazneen’s private thoughts, Hiddleston suggests that by flickering in and out of Nazneen’s thoughts […], Ali tentatively endeavours to “give voice” to her character, but she also uses her narrator as a frame. She oscillates between perspectives and registers as if to uncover the different layers of the text’s construction and to dramatize the unsettled relationship between the character and the narrative that gives her form.8
One might retort that the narrative “flickering in and out” of Nazneen’s mind is simply symptomatic of Ali’s adoption of an unironized, undramatized third-person omniscient narrator whose authority is never tangibly called into question. Moreover, it is precisely the adoption of a traditional narrative form which allows Ali to construct her narrative as translational; as well as freely entering the minds of its characters, it freely deciphers and decodes the nuances of all of their cross-cultural misinterpretations, a god-like omnipotence indeed. While a writer’s own account of their work must always be treated with some caution by critics, it is perhaps worth noting that in a conversation with Diran Adebayo in 2004, Monica Ali described *Brick Lane* as “a good old-fashioned narrative”.9 Indeed, as Alistair Cormack has shown, it is a work of realism; more specifically, it is a Bildungsroman.

While Hiddleston’s account often overstates the metatextuality of *Brick Lane* in order to emphasize the complexity of its representations of cultural difference, it is worth noting that at moments where the novel does function on a metatextual level, the effect achieved is often of the efficacy of textual representations of otherness being reasserted rather than destabilized. While Hasina’s letters are indeed a “device”, their ultimate function is to finally persuade Nazneen to stay in England – a decision which forms the climax of the novel – as well as to persuade the reader that this is the right decision. The nineteenth chapter, a transcription of the final letter, concludes Hasina’s bleak narrative with “*Sister I sitting in my electric light room write to you and I asking Him to put light in my heart so I see more clear the ways*” (p. 365). The subsequent chapter then immediately returns to the primary narrative and to Nazneen, who has also just read the letter:

> The paper was pale blue and light as a baby’s breath. Nazneen looked at the outline of her fingers beneath the letter. She held her hand open, flat. Hasina’s letter lifted at the ends, cleaving to its folds. Breathless, she watched it flicker and held it by fascination alone, like a butterfly that alights from nowhere and, weightless, displaces the world.

> Nazneen curled her fingers. She pinched along the creases and clapped the letter between her palms. *There was no escape*. Turning the letter deftly between the heel of one hand and the hollow of the other, she worked it around and around. Then she tucked it into the drawstrings of her underskirt at the place where she had pleated her sari.

> *The plane left tomorrow and she would not be on it.* (p. 365; my italics)

Nazneen’s decision not to return to Bangladesh is not made on account of the attractiveness of life in England so much as the fear of the sorts of horrors described by her sister. It is the very faltering inconclusiveness
of Hasina’s narrative that finally pushes Nazneen to assume responsibility for the conclusion of her own, with Hasina’s unending subjugation making her sister determined not to be simply “left to her fate”, a condition so glorified by her family in Bangladesh earlier in the novel. While the letters as material objects are occasionally alluded to earlier in the primary narrative, it is only at this pivotal moment that particular attention is drawn to their physicality; indeed, to their status as literary documents, as texts. The above description of the letter obviously invests it with metaphor: Nazneen can literally see herself “through” the translucent paper, and fragility is repeatedly emphasized. Moreover, as Nazneen dwells on the letter and finally resolves to defy her husband and remain in England, emphasis is placed on the ability of texts to inform personal decisions about the ways (and the places) in which life might best be lived; indeed, on the agency of textual representations of otherness. Rather than destabilizing its own sense of itself as an “authentic” textual account of cultural otherness, the novel’s metatextuality often functions as an assertion of the agency of such accounts.

It is clear, then, that Brick Lane’s metatextuality does not simply deem its apparent complicity with the stereotypical subversively provocative rather than familiarly reductive. However, this should not mean that debates surrounding the novel should default to the tired “authentic” versus “commodified” critical binary. Rather, an analysis of the ways in which it uses stereotypes – particularly in order to celebrate agency and integration – affords a more helpful account of the novel.

In her acknowledgements at the end of Brick Lane Ali expresses gratitude to Naila Kabeer, from whose book The Power to Choose she “drew inspiration” (p. 415). Kabeer’s socio-economic analysis responds to the apparent paradox of women in Dhaka – where purdah remains a highly influential cultural institution – “choosing” to leave their homes to work in garment factories while female Bangladeshi garment workers in London – an apparently liberal, post-feminist environment – have predominantly preferred to work as home-based machinists. Her study explores the different degrees and types of agency involved in these patterns of employment, and is largely based on testimonies provided by the workers themselves. While Ali openly cites Kabeer’s book as a source of “inspiration”, Brick Lane’s relationship with The Power To Choose is often as straightforwardly mimetic as it is inspirational, particularly in the case of Hasina:

A worker quoted by Kabeer: It doesn’t matter whether there are men or women in the factory if you think of them as your brother and sister.12

Ali’s Hasina: Men and women keep separate here. No men doing machining. [...] So you see how it is
and when we must speak it is as brother and sister. (p. 125.)

A worker quoted by Kabeer: When we come out of the factory in a group, the men say, “Here come the garment girls, pick the one you want.”

Ali’s Hasina: Some people making trouble outside factory. They shout to us. “Here come the garment girls. Choose the one you like.” (p. 124.)

A worker quoted by Kabeer: As long as I maintain my modesty, my purdah is not at risk. [...] You see, if I keep my fingers closed into a fist, you cannot open my hands can you? Even if you try, it will take you such a long time, it will not be worth your while. Similarly, if I maintain my purdah, no one can take it away from me.

Ali’s Hasina: Pure is the mind. Keep yourself pure in mind and God will protect. I close my fingers and make fist. I keep my fingers shut like this and you cannot open my hands can you? [...] Even if you try it take such long time it not worth it for you. Same thing my modesty. I keep purdah in the mind no one can take it. (p. 125.)

A man quoted by Kabeer: I can’t remember the name of this factory [...] but I heard that one hundred and fifty girls were found to be pregnant! [...] This is why people say terrible things about garment workers.

Ali’s Hasina: Zainab say one hundred and fifty girls in one factory getting pregnant. This is kind of thing people say. Who going to stop them? (p. 127.)

Moreover, Ali does not only directly reproduce some of the attitudes and preconceptions expressed in or described by the testimonies in The Power To Choose; some of the specific details about Hasina’s life and relationships are also lifted from them. For example, in reference to a worker who, sliding into casual prostitution, received a proposal of marriage, Kabeer recounts that “[d]espite her protestations – ‘I have told him, I am a street woman, I have nothing in the world, I am all that I have, I can give you nothing’ – he proposed to her through her landlord and she accepted.” Somewhat similarly (and this is, as above, where we get what seems to be a summary of her impossibly miserable condition), Ali’s Hasina – who begins to sleep with her landlord when...
she cannot afford to pay rent – also receives a marriage proposal: “I speak to Ahmed again. Again he is pressing [for marriage]. I tell him this. I am a low woman. I have nothing. I am all that I have. I can give you nothing” (p. 140).

That Ali so obviously bases Hasina – her general and more specific circumstances, as well as her attitudes and beliefs – on the testimonies recorded in The Power To Choose is perhaps indicative of an attempt to make her an “authentic” character, and might seem to offer a means of debunking accusations of the novel simply propagating stereotypes. Women like Hasina, Ali might retort, “really exist”. However, the testimonies which Ali appropriates for the purposes of Hasina’s letters are, unfailingly, the most despairing ones that Kabeer’s study has to offer. Many of the women in Dhaka that she quotes express increased (and increasing) wealth, autonomy and agency. Furthermore, as well as only appropriating the most desolate of the testimonies recorded by Kabeer, in doing so Ali occasionally modifies them to make them even bleaker. As in passages quoted above, for example, Ali changes one worker’s assertion that it does not matter that men and women mix in the garment factories to Hasina’s assertion that men and women do not mix there. Here, then, Ali seems to portray Dhaka as more repressive than do the most despairing testimonies in Kabeer’s study.

Many of the women interviewed in Kabeer’s London-based research speak of physical abuse, racism, isolation and extreme financial struggle, but if Nazneen’s narrative has any root in these testimonies at all, it is only in the most fortunate and positive of them. Moreover, in the final stages of the novel, Ali seems to take particular delight in having Nazneen transcend other people’s stereotypical notions of her; she certainly demonstrates that she is not the “simple” Bengali wife and mother that Karim believes her to be, and when a visiting councillor asks if she is finding it hard to cope, she simply replies “no” and he leaves looking “disappointed” (p. 406). While Kabeer certainly draws attention to the exploitative conditions which Bangladeshi women in both London and Dhaka have been exposed to by the garment industry, she finds in the emergence of garment factories in Dhaka a narrative of ongoing social and economic emancipation, but takes the “home-based piecework” carried out in London as being symptomatic of ongoing social and economic exclusion. In Kabeer’s account, then, it is the women in Dhaka rather than London who are experiencing an increase in personal agency; indeed, in their “power to choose”. Crucially, Ali’s novel seems to invert rather than replicate this finding. During the course of Brick Lane, Hasina becomes increasingly powerless and socially excluded, while Nazneen undergoes such a powerful emancipation that she is finally “startled by her own agency” (p. 10). While Hasina is abandoned by a succession of men,
Nazneen chooses to leave both Karim and Chanu. Hasina is eventually excluded from the garment factories; the route to greater personal autonomy which, at least in Kabeer’s account, they offer is refused her. For Nazneen, on the contrary, the London garment industry proves to be an opportunity for emancipation and independence; we learn in the final stages of the novel that she has become a business partner with Razia and has even started designing, as well as making, the clothing, thereby assuming a creative role in their new enterprise.

Ali’s novel most obviously “draws inspiration” from Kabeer’s study in that both celebrate “the power to choose”, and yet Ali straightforwardly and conclusively denies Hasina this power, but grants it to Nazneen. Debates about whether or not Hasina’s character is “knowingly”, and so also “ironically”, stereotypical are not only somewhat futile but also wrong-headed. Indeed, Hasina is such a stereotypical representation of defeat and naivety, because this forms a counterpoint to – and so serves to further emphasize and to render extraordinary – Nazneen’s narrative of emancipation and enlightenment. By the end of the novel, Nazneen has not only discovered a new-found agency but has also achieved both self-awareness and an understanding of the society around her, and has begun to forge an economic and social role for herself as well as a familial one. In so reconciling individuation and socialization, Brick Lane might usefully be termed a “multicultural Bildungsroman”. Contrary to Chanu’s fears, Nazneen does not lose her identity in multicultural London but rather discovers it, with the novel celebrating the adaptability both of its immigrant protagonist as well as that of the multicultural metropole.

That a realist novel such as Brick Lane has been so prevalently read as a postmodern, metatextual work is symptomatic of the profound unease which many have felt regarding its apparent complicity with the propagation of stereotypes. The fervour with which critics have excavated instances of “knowing irony” from the novel is indicative of a critical readiness to read any contemporary text which deals with cultural difference in a particular, predetermined way, and this readiness should be the cause of much concern. What is perhaps most interesting about Brick Lane is the degree to which it is prepared to employ stereotypes in counterpoint to its narrative of empowerment; the degree to which it prioritizes the celebration of multiculturalism over the destabilization of the stereotypical.

NOTES

1 Alistair Cormack, “Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form: Realism and the Postcolonial Subject in Brick Lane”, Contemporary Literature, 47, 4 (2006), 695–721.
2 Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, Chatham: BCA, 2003, p. 233; italics in original. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.


4 Cormack, “Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form”, 715.

5 Jane Hiddleston, “Shapes and Shadows: (Un)veiling the Immigrant in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*”, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 40, 1 (2005), 57–72, 63.

6 Canepari Labib, “The Multiethnic City”, 212.

7 *ibid.*, 217.


11 It should be noted that while Ali’s obvious appropriation of numerous sections of Kabeer’s study might initially appear to constitute plagiarism, she thanks Kabeer “for her comments on the manuscript and also for lunch” (*Brick Lane*, p. 415). Presumably, then, Kabeer is fully aware of the degree to which her study has been appropriated for the purposes of the novel.


13 *ibid.*, p. 83.

14 *ibid.*, p. 91.

15 *ibid.*, p. 84.

16 *ibid.*, p. 106.