

# The Real Thing

24-year-old British-Asian Author Kia Abdullah's debut novel *Life, Love and Assimilation* has been compared to the likes of *Brick Lane* and has attracted praise and condemnation in equal measures. **TIM CUMMING** meets the woman that has been hailed as a younger, rawer Monica Ali.

At a petite 5'1", Kia sits in the chair opposite me, swinging her legs. This childlike act betrays the intelligence and acuity that is revealed once she starts to speak. Her face changes with light and shadow and as the interview progresses, her dichotomous personality separates and merges at least half a dozen times. She speaks knowledgeably about a wide range of issues but cannot decide what her stance is on many of them. She defends her culture wildly but then criticizes it with equal zest. She is an audacious writer but cowers at the thought of her parents reading some of her more explicit offerings. She is a self-confessed Geek, a Writer, a Computer Scientist and an all-round "good girl". I took the time out to meet the many faces of Kia Abdullah.

I start by asking her the customary question of how it feels to be compared to Monica Ali. Instead of the gushing response I expect, Kia frowns thoughtfully. She says, "I can't get used to it to tell you the truth. I have a lot of respect for Monica Ali and am honoured to be compared to her but I also feel that we are being pigeonholed together simply because of the content of our novels." I point out that *Brick Lane* and *Life, Love and Assimilation* both follow the stories of a young Bangladeshi woman living in Tower Hamlets. "And that is enough to draw comparisons?" she asks. "*Brick Lane* explores the experiences of a woman who is new to England; one who cannot speak the language and feels like an alien. The main character in *Life, Love and Assimilation* was born and bred in London and speaks better English than she does Bangladeshi. Comparing the two is like comparing *Bridget Jones* to *Pride and Prejudice* simply because they both follow the stories of White women trying to find Mr. Right."

With the recent controversy surrounding the filming of *Brick Lane*, I ask Kia if there have been any negative reactions to *Life, Love and Assimilation*. "Of course. It comes with the territory. People don't like to see what is right in front of their faces. *Life, Love and Assimilation* discusses themes that people would prefer to brush under the carpet." She goes on to say that, "Drug addiction is such a massive problem in the East End but nothing concrete is being done to tackle it. People feel helpless. I have heard people say, 'He's just a user, not a dealer, the police won't do anything,' and to some extent, that is true." If anyone can speak with authority on the subject, it is Kia. In her debut, she writes about dealing with a drug addict in the family from personal experience. In many ways, it is difficult to see where Kieran, the main character in the book, ends and where Kia begins. "It is fact-based fiction and many a reader has asked me if a specific part is true or not. I can't categorise every single scene but much of the first half is based on my life. Some say that the book packs in too many stereotypes but these issues are stereotypes for a reason; because they do happen. They happened to me."

This is the point I realise that Kia is the "real thing." Unlike Monica Ali, who grew up in Northern England and attended Oxford University, Kia writes about life in Tower Hamlets as an insider. She grew up

in Tower Hamlets, she struggled through the trials and tribulations it had to offer and she did it well. As the only child out of eight to graduate from university, she says, "Sure I'm proud of myself. People have contacted me and told me how I have inspired them to do better; that I've shown them that a person's background doesn't matter and it's true. It doesn't matter if you have illiterate parents or were reared on state benefits. It doesn't matter that you wore nothing but hand-me-downs and ripped jeans. What matters is your knowledge and ability to learn. If you have those two things on your side, you can do anything." At this, her serious expression evaporates and transforms into a wide smile. "Listen to me. I'm a walking cliché," she laughs, once again changing personalities in a split second.

Since her rise to fame in May 2006, Kia has written for regional newspapers, appeared on national radio stations discussing everything from the Olympics to the Israel/Lebanon conflict, and has been approached by the BBC and various Asian-based publications. Oh, and she also had an arranged marriage. For a woman who dedicated an entire book to making one's own decisions, isn't it a bit strange that she had an arranged marriage? She nods in agreement. "I understand where you are coming from but for me, it was not a situation where I was being told what to do. I find it amusing because I have had non-Asian people say to me, 'But you come across as an emancipated woman,' and I can only laugh. Am I caged because I'm not shackled up with Richard Bacon? Am I not liberated because I don't go clubbing and drinking and date freely? Am I

shackled because I chose to have an arranged marriage?" And therein lies the crux of her point; she chose to have an arranged marriage. But why would one choose to have an arranged marriage? "It is a subject that can be debated all day long but it was the right thing for me. I was ready for marriage and fate just wasn't coming up with the goods. My family presented an array of guys to me and whilst there is always pressure on girls, you have to stand up and say no when it doesn't feel right. I only said yes when I clicked with one. Not every girl has the freedom to continually say no but that is where she should make a stand. *Life, Love and Assimilation* isn't about rebelling against your

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parents or tradition or our customs. It is about finding a balance. It is about respecting your culture but knowing when to say no."

And is it working for her? "I am happy," she says, her dour expression lifting to reveal a bright smile. For a 24-year-old, she is quite philosophical; "I am a strong believer in destiny. That doesn't mean you lay back and let life wash over you. It means that when times are tough, you have faith because you know things are going to turn out ok." Will her next book be about the highs and lows of arranged marriage from a first-hand view? "No, I'm afraid not. I think I've aired all my dirty laundry. My next book is entirely different," she says mysteriously. I want to discuss more of the issues she covers in *Life, Love and Assimilation* and in her online blog but time has flown and Kia smiles apologetically.

As her petite frame jumps off the chair in a childlike manner, she grips my hand in a firm handshake. She truly is a product of two different worlds but something about her intelligent eyes makes me believe what she said about things always turning out ok.

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