

No Offence by Salil Tripathi
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LONDON -- On a balmy Sunday afternoon, nearly 60 men and two women marched down the most famous street in this city's East End, Brick Lane. A man called Abdus Salique led their chants of protest:

Maro maro jota maro
Monica-ke gaaler maro

(Hit hard, use your shoes to hit hard
Slap Monica's cheeks, hit her hard)

"Monica" is Monica Ali, author of "Brick Lane," which was short-listed for the 2003 Booker Prize and the National Book Critics' Circle Award. Its popularity has brought tourists to Brick Lane, and London-based Ruby Films is making the novel into a movie. These protesters want to stop them. Mr. Salique says the book has insulted the lane's hardworking Bangladeshis: Ms. Ali knew nothing about them, since she was only half-Bangladeshi and married to "a white man."

The Bangladeshis are certainly industrious. They own nearly 90% of the 12,000 "Indian" restaurants in Britain. Commerce flows through Brick Lane freely, rejuvenating this depressed area, which has been home to immigrants since the 16th century -- first the French Huguenots, then Jews, who converted a church into a synagogue. Now the Jews have gone; the synagogue has become a mosque for Bangladeshi Muslims; French street names are written in elegant Bengali script.

Yet while the Huguenots and the Jews became part of the British landscape, the self-appointed Bangladeshi leaders are demonstrating that they're not willing to -- chiefly by rejecting a core British value, tolerance. At the protest, some wanted to burn Ms. Ali's book, which would have been a first in Britain since a Muslim group in Bradford burned Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses" back in 1989.

At first, London's establishment ignored the grumbling, but at the first threat of marches and potential violence its mood shifted quickly to appease the community that feels itself insulted. As advised by the police and authorities, Ruby Films packed up and left for another, yet-to-be determined filming location. Protesters pledged to follow.

For some time now, liberal acquiescence has strengthened the most radical attention-seekers in Britain. This is not only about Islam: Hundreds of Sikhs attacked the Birmingham Repertory, closing "Behzti" (Dishonor), a play written by a British Sikh, because its theme, of rape in a Sikh temple, upset them. Hindu fundamentalists charged into a central London art gallery that was showing the paintings of Maqbool Fida Husain, India's foremost artist and a Muslim, because he had painted Hindu goddesses in the nude. An irate lecturer from northern England toppled wax statues of soccer star David Beckham and his pop singer wife, Victoria Beckham that depicted them as Joseph and Mary at a nativity scene at Madame Tussauds.

The offended can switch off their TV sets, not buy the book they don't like, even call for a boycott, and picket the play or filming. But when a mob drives filmmakers away, closes an exhibition or a play, threatens violence and scares the artist to go into hiding, that has a no small impact on everyone else's freedoms.

There is another reason Ms. Ali is so hated. Her novel's protagonist, 19-year-old Nazneen, comes to London in an arranged marriage. Her husband wants her to stay at home and bear children. Ultimately, he leaves Britain, but she chooses to stay. The predominantly male protesters on Brick Lane are troubled by this portrait of an emancipated woman. "This is England," a friend, Razia, tells Nazneen. "You can do whatever you like."