

Diasporic Identity And Female Subjectivity In Monica Ali's Brick Lane

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Abstract:

The white race in colonized nations has greatly transplanted European forms of thinking, language and culture. Their so called 'civilizing mission' led to the creation of diaspora as a common phenomenon during colonialism. The paper titled: "Diasporic Identity and Female Subjectivity in Monica Ali's Brick Lane" intends to explore the ambivalent position of the dislocated diaspora sentiments of people in the migrated land where they seem to be constantly juggling with 'to be or not to be' kind of desire to belong, within the context of Monica Ali's The Brick Lane. Monica Ali as a Bangladeshi novelist uses memory and imagination as the only means to conquer the sense of alienation and keep the roots of one's original home alive. Brick Lane is an eye opener text representing the cultural, racial and gendered prejudices of the Eastern diasporic communities in the West. The study endeavors to negotiate the challenges of a bicultural identity of people in an immigrant land, especially women who go through doubled marginalisation in terms of culture and gender. Although the novel reflects the question of Bangladeshi diasporic community in London, the central focus is about the personal development of the female protagonist, Nazneen as she undergoes various challenging moments of being culturally displaced and finally transforming herself from being a simple village girl to becoming an independent woman having an agency over herself. The novel thus emphasizes on the need to respect and accept every individual equally beyond geographical borders and origins and aims to reclaim women's absolute sense of selfhood and freedom.

Keywords: Diaspora, alienation, marginalisation, culture, gender, independent, selfhood

Introduction

According to the book Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction, Pramod K. Nayar writes about the importance of diasporic literature as a global phenomenon:

“Diasporic writing , especially in the age of globalization, is a consciousness raising genre, where political issues of cultural citizenship, cosmopolitan justice, and global inequality run alongside themes of nostalgia, imaginative reconstructions of the homeland, and identities. The theme of identity in diasporic writing is not merely an exercise in exploring multiplicities of location and subjecthoods. It is a larger political issue of global justice, cultural rights, self-determination, and cosmopolitanism.”(Nayar 191)

Post-colonial Britain has witnessed a major wave of immigrations from various parts of the world, particularly from South Asian regions following the period of decolonization. To express such sentiments, literature serves as a major source of narrating and remembering the experiences of immigrant identities during this period. Monica Ali is one such prolific writer from Bangladesh who wrote the novel *Brick Lane* (2003) that depicts the Islamic culture within secular society and the migrant experience in the adoptive land of London. Set in Tower Hamlets predominantly inhabited by the Bangladeshi community of London, the novel follows the diasporic dilemma of the female protagonist Nazneen and her husband, Chanu and explores the quest of individual self in an alienated land particularly that of female lives and spaces. *Brick Lane* engages with the diasporic life of Bangladeshi people in an English nation as an “effect of migration, immigration and exile.”(Nayar 187) The study aims at familiarizing the readers with the very concept of diaspora and women’s position in a displaced land in order to give a clearer understanding and interpretation of their quest of belongingness.

London as a post-colonial hub “becomes less a city that loses its imperial ‘edge’, its narrative of ‘Englishness’, as immigrant populations ‘decolonize’ London’s spaces itself. As a result no city retains its pure English or imperial character. It is now, increasingly, a zone where colonial and postcolonial collide, in a peculiar kind of immigrant colonization (even though the power relations between the immigrant classes and groups and the ‘native’ English may not be equalized). Such a process, of course, lends a dualism, a schizophrenia, to both ‘native’ English and the immigrant in what is fluid act of mutual transformation.” (Nayar 215)

Feeling of alienation is the most common situation of a diasporic individual which has its sociological, philosophical and psychological dimension. Within the so-called system of patriarchy, immigrant women become the worst victims of displacement as they are doubly marginalized due to their culture and gender. Nazneen internalizes her inferior identity in a foreign land as she likes being invisible and passive unlike Chanu who is caught in an in-between state of struggle towards belongingness. Nazneen tries to connect with the new English culture but feels disintegrated which intensifies her alienated feelings all the more. There is only one society she feels she can identify herself with, that is, the community of Bengali women in *Brick Lane*. Hence, the quest of belongingness is constantly evident through the novel both as an immigrant and as a woman.

In *Brick Lane*, the institution of marriage as a social and cultural product is portrayed through the displaced Bangladeshi couple, Nazneen and Chanu. “In eastern societies, marriage is an important

social ritual since it perpetuates the family name and consolidates the family wealth and reputation.”(Mansoor 68) Marriage in the novel is treated as an economic security and livelihood strategy. The actual essence of marriage that should be based solely on love and mutual understanding is what Monica Ali contests through the text.

“Marriage becomes an effort on Chanu’s part to establish stronger roots in the home country, and to re-create the socio-cultural environment of his birthplace in the host country. This is done to mitigate the sense of exile that he experiences in the UK.” (Mansoor 69)

Brick Lane questions the feeling of double oppression suffered by the poor classes of people of the third world immigrants and the socio-cultural conflicts between their East and West traditions they are often exposed to. “Having arrived in a new geographical and cultural context, they negotiate two cultures: their own and the new one.” (Nayar 189) It is also interesting to note how Monica Ali tries to bring in certain references of racism and troubled identity faced not only by the Bangladeshis in London but also by the other third world people like black immigrants. When Chanu first came to London he had high ambitions of establishing a prominent position but it soon gets shattered and creates frustration and grief for Chanu after he

realizes the harsh racist treatment of the whites toward Muslim outsiders. As he remarks in the novel:

“When I came I was a young man. I had ambitions. Big dreams. When I got off the plane, I had my degree certificate in my suitcase and a few pounds in my pocket. I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me. I was going to join the civil service and become Private Secretary to the Prime Minister...That was my plan. And then I found things were a bit different. These people here didn’t know who jumped off the boat possessing only the lice on their heads.” (Ali 21)

Monica Ali accounts how in the native Bangladesh, poverty has been highly predominant and hence educated people like Chanu think they could climb the ladder of success only by moving to the western countries. But for such people, everything only turns out to be an illusion when they are placed within the real Western world which treats them as secondary and insignificant beings. The race and skin colour becomes a serious threat towards their discriminated experience. As Nazneen says to another immigrant woman Ruya: “My husband says they are racist, particularly Mr. Dalloway. He thinks he will get the promotion, but it will take him longer than any white man.”(Ali 53)

Chanu’s situation reveals how the subjugating tendencies of the West toward the East have still not ended completely despite living in a post-modern world. Monica Ali stresses the need of constantly contesting against such discriminatory experiences faced by the diasporic people and attempts to awaken the world to develop a humane approach in treating everyone as equal beings. The novel is an outstanding representation of the miseries of Bangladeshi immigrants and it creates the possibility of emphasizing upon some radical changes amongst such people as they are forced

to alleviate their impoverished conditions. Moreover, women become active participants in helping to raise the life's standards in European land.

Religion also becomes another area due to which the immigrants face oppression. Muslims were unwelcomed by the whites after the 9/11 attacks and the colonizers began to stigmatize and target Islamic people as the product of terrorism. In the novel, we see some leaflets carrying

daunting warnings and messages for the Muslim immigrants that anxiously threaten their identity. Chanu's daughter, Shahana finds a leaflet in the letterbox which mentions Christianity as "one of the world's great religions" (Ali, 205) whereas it attributes Islam as "a religion of hatred and intolerance." (Ali 205)

As a woman, we see how Nazneen internalizes obedience and passivity right since her childhood. She submits herself to her fate and doesn't even question her father when she was forced to marry a much older man of forty years and migrate to an alien nation. Nazneen as a woman is doubly oppressed in the English nation. She can't even speak in English that worsens her situation as she finds it difficult to communicate with others except the Bangladeshis. She is trapped within the four walls of domesticity that makes her feel isolated and depressed. When Nazneen wants to go out of her house and get a job to keep herself occupied, Chanu doesn't appreciate her and rather remarks negatively: "If you go out, ten people will say, I saw her walking on the street. And I will look like a fool." (Ali 30) This reflects how Chanu is a typical patriarchal figure who thinks that it is only the right of men to go out and earn for the family and a woman's assigned role is to take care of domestic needs. "The constraints that surround her and the whole tradition that weighs on her keep her from feeling responsible for the universe: this is the profound reason for her mediocrity." (Beauvoir 749)

As time passes by, Nazneen comes across a Bangladeshi young man in London with whom she falls in love with. She feels more and more alienated being left all alone in the house and starts finding salvation to reconnect to her lost self after meeting Karim and involving herself into a relationship with him. The patriarchal internalization fills her mind and heart with doubts about her affair as she feels the guilt and baggage of being fragmented within the confines of religious and traditional norms against her personal desires to revive back her free and younger self. At the end of the novel, she rejects both her husband and Karim and instead follows her own independent road of recreating a new liberated individuality of her own.

Monica Ali also engages with the mode of deconstructing the entirely negative dominating image of the West through the characters of first generation immigrants like Mr. Azad. She

presents an alternative view of the Western way of life as she herself got assimilated into this culture that gives freedom to women to nurture one's choice and realize one's own personal growth. Brick Lane promises a diasporic woman's renewed identity in the western land in contrast to their position in the home country where she is just looked as the 'other', being measured in terms of her body and deprived of education and who are expected to confirm to the gendered ideals. It is only when Nazneen enters the British society that her journey towards emancipation begins. She starts sewing at home itself and earns some money. This paves her way to becoming a self-sufficient woman. The novel thus traces the bildungsroman aspect of female subjectivity through an eastern woman like Nazneen.

Language becomes the most important tool for Nazneen's growth. Despite Chanu's repeated attempts to restrain her from any kind of social interaction with the outside world beyond her home, she manages to learn English language and wanders alone freely in the streets of London in the later part of the plot. Initially, Nazneen seems to take her husband's permission before doing anything. She asks Chanu if it is ok for her to go to college to learn English lessons. But Chanu rejects her wishes as he replies:

"You're going to be a mother... Will that not keep you busy enough? And you can't take a baby to college. Babies have to be fed; they have to have their bottoms cleaned. It's not so simple as that." (Ali 75)

Such a response from Chanu portrays how women in patriarchy are conventionally valued only in terms of her role as a wife and a mother, confined to domestic responsibilities. But this so-called constructed notion is not fixed and can be challenged and overturned instead of silently obeying everything without questioning. The way Nazneen successfully evolves at the end of the story gives an instance of how through resistance and one's will to rise above one's given situations, every individual can claim the right to live according to one's own terms. She is the epitome of how every woman can transgress the clichéd image of the 'angel of the house'. By resisting against socio-cultural constraints instead of just accepting it quietly, every marginalized woman like Nazneen can eventually taste the flavor of freedom, individuality and the essence of life beyond defined boundaries to be able to become what one desires.

Monica Ali uses literary narrative as a tool to encourage every Bangladeshi womenfolk to embrace womanhood as the ultimate road to their individualized identity. Her novel is a call for a renewed world of every woman to be given the right and opportunity to be who they are from within, to be educated and raise awareness regarding their inherent rights to make them capable of competing in the market for economic independence and contribute equally towards the development of a progressive society.

Today, we undoubtedly see many rebellious and iconic women figures who have touched the zenith of success and become great leaders in different spheres. The greatest example is that of Bangladesh's very own current female Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina who has been the longest

serving Prime Minister in the country's history. She is the epitome of how every Bangladeshi woman has the capability to become the primary beings as symbols of change and inspiration for redefining the given gendered roles. Although patriarchal prejudices have still not been completely eradicated even today, continuous rebellion and coping up with the ever changing dynamics of current times will surely contribute towards the removal and rejection of all the evil practices upon the subaltern groups of people. Instead of letting others control women's fate, women must take charge over their own fate and choice and assume absolute authority and agency over their own body and self.

Nazneen's sister, Hasina's letters reveal women's discriminatory treatment in Bangladesh where Hasina speak of how she is tortured and beaten by her husband. But Hasina revolts bravely against her situation as she escapes away and begins to live an independent life in the capital city of Dhaka. Hasina's letters give hope and inspiration to Nazneen to start thinking about her own independence too. Nazneen's daughter Shahana is a modern, western educated, second generation immigrant of London who also never hesitates to boldly express anything she wants instead of keeping quiet. She insists on getting herself a tattoo and lip ring and claims the authority to do what she wants with her own body as she says: "it is my body". (Ali 292) When her father Chanu decides to take his family back to Bangladesh, she strongly resists that she wants to stay in London.

The symbol of television in the novel becomes an important marker of Nazneen's source of recreation that lets her imagine the outside world she yearns from within. Whenever she watches ice-skating on television, she feels amazed by the beautiful scenes. The spirit of new Nazneen makes herself think about work and money as the first step towards her renewed identity. The sewing machine helps her gain financial independence and the ability to contribute for the welfare of her family. Karim's presence in Nazneen's life also enables her to value her own self and the need to regard equal rights between men and women in any kind of decision-making process. Nazneen's growth is worth observing in the end as she develops an understanding of her own life's principles, she neither chooses to return to Bangladesh with Chanu nor accepts Karim's marriage proposal. She finally embraces the authority over herself to choose what she wants without depending on anyone else's choice. Razia, Nazneen's first friend in London also influences her new found independence and self-conscience. Razia's husband dies at a young age and her son is a drug addict. But instead of helplessly crying on her condition, she gets herself a job as she knows the necessity of taking care of her own life and her children. This further inspires Nazneen's awakening to get a job for financial independence. The novel is therefore Monica Ali's rewriting of immigrant experience of double marginalisation faced by the diasporic community primarily women, that rather opens up the space for the recreation of a brave, mature and strong-minded independent selfhood caused by the experiences they are exposed to.

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