

Diasporic Displacement and Immigrant Experience in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

PREM PRATAP

Abstract. Monica Ali, an English writer of Bangladeshi origin, is a highly accomplished and influential author of the contemporary times. She holds a prominent position among current South Asian writers. She gained recognition after publishing her first novel, *Brick Lane* in 2003. The novel has been critically acclaimed as a prominent tale offering the contrasting accounts of migration across genders and providing a nuanced perspective on the process of diaspora by highlighting both its negative and positive sides. The primary focus of *Brick Lane* is the immigrant diaspora, the most significant aspect of immigrant life. In fact, the fear of losing the tradition, the feeling of being an alien in a foreign land, loneliness and fragmented self concept are problems that are experienced by many expatriate women. The article will draw upon the theoretical framework of diaspora studies, to provide a broader understanding of the subject.

Keywords : Diaspora; freedom; identity; immigrant; acculturation.

Brick Lane, which is the focus of the study of the paper, is an influential work in the domain of contemporary South Asian Literature. The novel was published in 2003 and is considered to be magnum opus of Monica Ali. The novel is set between 1985 and 2002 in East London, with intermittent shifts to Bangladesh through the protagonist's memories. In 2003, the novel received a nomination for the prestigious Booker Prize, and in 2007 it was successfully made into a film. Her work garnered international acclaim and facilitated her in craving a distinct identity in the expanding realm of South Asian diasporic literature. The novel *Brick Lane* explores immigration, cultural shock and the problems involved in the movement from one country to another. The novel depicts the journey of Nazneen from Dhaka to London. Nazneen migrates to London after her marriage with Chanu. *Brick Lane* revolves around Nazneen, who moves to England after her marriage with Chanu. She spends her days lonely and is dependent on her husband for everything. She is not competent enough and cannot speak English. While living in Tower Hamlets, she came in contact with Razia. She starts up her sewing job at

home, meets a man younger to her, and develops an affair with him. She gives birth to a son, Raqib, who dies in infancy and later she gives birth to two daughters, Shahana and Bibi. Chanu wants to take his family back to Bangladesh, but she decides to stay back along with her two daughters. Nazneen migrates to London to consummate the marriage with Chanu, the marriage arranged by her father. The novel deals with the struggles to adjust, to assimilate and the cultural clash. In England, Nazneen is alone, away from her family and friends. As an immigrant, she has to struggle to adapt and has to recreate herself. The novel *Brick Lane* tracks the process by which she moves fitfully and self-laceratingly from shame to tentative self-possession from a willing submission to a belief in her own agency from a silence, both voluntary and culturally conditioned to a yell of liberation. She skillfully narrates Nazneen's isolation, her passiveness, and at last her assimilation and acculturation in the newly acquired land. The novel moves back and forth, from Bangladesh to England and vice versa. Nazneen adopts the alien land; she meets different kinds of people who enrich her experiences. Her daughters do not want to be dictated by their father's thinking. They want to live their own life.

Monica Ali is a British novelist born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, her father being Bengali and her mother English. Her family had to escape the civil war in Dhaka, and they fled to England, when she was three years old. Her origin along with being raised in Britain enable her to see both sides of the barricade with credibility. This fact is consequently reflected in her works. *Brick Lane* could be said to be a novel that centres on the notion of translation-the bearing across of words, identities, and cultures. She is capable of breaking barriers using her faculty and allowing the reader to comprehend the presented issues. Her novels do not only have engaging stories, witty dialogues, and scenes depicted with hauntingly detailed description, but its depth rises mainly from intricate characters, whose background, behaviour, aspirations, and beliefs enable the reader to grasp their perspectives, imagine them in the real world and understand their struggles.

Although, the novel's title alludes to a specific location situated in the eastern part of London, it provides scant information regarding the various facets of this particular area. Instead, the story primarily centres on portraying the immigrant encounters of the Bangladeshi immigrant community in London. The tale revolves around Nazneen, a young rural girl from Bangladesh. Nazneen marries Chanu, a fat, unattractive and

opinionated man, almost twice her age. Subsequently, the couple relocates to Tower Hamlets, a deprived residential area in London, where Chanu has already worked before his marriage. Apart from Nazneen and Chanu, another important character in the novel is Karim, a Sylheti lad, and the novel *Brick Lane* depicts a story from perspective of a young girl Nazneen, whom we see undergo assimilation in Britain as an immigrant from Bangladesh. She and her sister Hasina are children of a rich man, and they grow up in a small village called Gouripur. They have an especially religious mother Rupban, who spends most of her time weeping. Only later we find out that she committed suicide by falling on a spear out of jealousy, as her husband has affairs with different women, while she, as a woman, has no say in it. The sisters are separated when Nazneen is sent to London through an arranged marriage, while Hasina runs off with her boyfriend and is disinherited by their father. Nazneen's husband Chanu is much older and has lived in London for years prior.

Chanu is a man striving for success, wealth, and respect, he spends most of his time reading, he has degrees from literature and philosophy, which he is very proud and boastful about. However, he is a much older man and certainly not what would a young girl hope for in a husband. They live in a part of London called Tower Hamlets, which is strictly Muslim inhabited. Nazneen is mostly not allowed to leave the house by herself and when trying to get a job or trying to learn some English, she is shortly reminded that it would be disrespectful for her husband and others would think he cannot provide for his family. She is also told that there is no need and time, as she is going to be raising children and keeping the household intact. Her only interactions are mostly women from the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets, her friend Razia and older woman Mrs. Islam. Their first son Raqib is born, which brings Chanu the idea of returning home, since he is afraid of the English society corrupting their first-born and with his patriarchy nature and escalating situation around terrorist attacks on the world trade centre, it leads him to want to come to make this decision. Raqib stops breathing at night and dies. We hear from Hasina in letters to Nazneen, helplessly observing the terrible misfortune she has through the years as an abandoned woman in Dhaka. As time passes, Nazneen gives birth to two daughters, Shahana and Bibi, and Chanu makes a concession of buying a sewing machine for his wife to earn extra money to travel back to Bangladesh. Nazneen meets a young Muslim Karim through her job and falls in love with him. He seems to be everything her husband is not,

seemingly knowing his place in the world, but after some time Nazneen finds out he likes her for the same reasons Chanu formerly did, which is being the authentic obedient village girl, not spoilt by the western society. Nazneen crumbles under pressure of the guilt from the affair, escalated by the situation between Chanu and his oldest daughter, as Shahana wants nothing to do with Bangladeshi culture and does not want to travel to Dhaka, and she collapses. Her transition from a housewife to a working woman has been a long journey and has been mainly motivated by the liberal society of London. For Nazneen, “the new cultural modalities in host society offer many ways to challenge, transform or negotiate traditional prescriptions of womanhood” (Bonifacio 6). The time of Nazneen’s recovery leads her to realize that her relationship with Karim is not what it seems like, since they both see in each other something they are not and want different things, upon which she ends the affair. Nazneen sees a man confident and happy in his place in life, only hiding behind insecurity and confusion about his identity and Karim sees a girl from a small village in Bangladesh, whom Nazneen no longer is. Mrs. Islam turns out to be a money usurer, whose victim ends up being no one else than Chanu, when he borrows money for the sewing machine and a computer, which delays their time of departure. Chanu’s frustration and disillusionment with England come to the surface when he states:

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 suit-case. 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 I found things were a bit different. (*Brick Lane* 21)

Chanu is finally ready to take the step of travelling back to his home country, but it is soon obvious, that no other member of his family longs for that. Nazneen’s husband cannot see himself staying in London, as everything he had hoped for failed and leaves the Tower Hamlets and leaves Nazneen to be the head of the family. Hasina fails to stay out of trouble and lastly, we hear about her, she quits her job as a nanny in a wealthy household and she runs off with the local chef. Karim travels back to Bangladesh to the roots, he had always felt closer to. As a year goes by, Razia and the daughters take Nazneen ice-skating, expressing

their freedom and independence, ending the plot with Nazneen being able to enjoy herself, even while wearing a sari. Mrs. Azad, in contrast, reasons that the idea of 'tragedy' as suggested by Chanu is not correct :

Listen, when I'm in Bangladesh, I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work. I work with white girls and I'm just one of them. If I want to come home and eat curry, that's my business. Some women spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English.' She looked at Nazneen who focused on Raqib. 'They go around covered from head to toe, in their little walking prisons, and when someone calls to them in the street they are upset. The society is racist. (114)

What Mrs. Azad says is that the real tragedy lays in a reality where people don't change themselves but want everything to change for them. Her speech also explains how free Mrs. Azad thinks she is because she has released herself from traditional cultural beliefs. Her attitudes are disturbing and inapprehensible to Chanu and Nazneen, but greatly acceptable to the western reader. She is fully educated, speaks English fluently, does not wear the sari, and goes to work. Moreover, she calls her people racist who are constantly complaining but unable to assimilate according to context. The conflict between first-generation and second-generation and their contrasting experiences of diaspora as described in *Brick Lane* have been examined, as well. The first generations are, in the novel, constructed by immigrants who have to deal with culture clash, language barrier, and feelings of alienation, while the second generation deals with identity crisis caused by being torn between two cultures, conflicts with their parents and rebellion against their culture and beliefs and alcohol and drug addiction. However, it has been shown how different second-generation characters adopt different responses to their situation as some prefer to build their country-of-origin identity, like Karim, while others, like Shahana or Dr. Azad's daughter, wish to integrate.

Despite having settled in England now, Ali maintains a profound connection with her native country. She frequently expresses nostalgia for her origins and consequently writes about her experiences of living away from her home. Ali's writings demonstrate her profound sense of

displacement, as her characters yearn for a sense of belonging and experience a profound lack of rootedness in an unfamiliar land. By bringing the complexities and problems of living away from one's homeland to the fore, Ali becomes a representative of Bangladeshi immigrants in London. As a female writer who belongs to a diasporic community, Ali's writings mostly revolve around the themes of identity and belonging. She skilfully portrays the difficulties faced by immigrants, particularly women, as they strive to adjust in a new environment.

Conclusion

Analysing the novel carefully, it can be concluded that *Brick Lane* offers contrasting experiences of migration. The novel overall explores issues of identity, cultural clashes along with the evolving roles of women within the context of migration and settlement in a new country. *Brick Lane* being a story by Ali, provides a beautiful account to fuel a more informed discourse of migration and identity in a contemporary society.

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