

Diasporic Identity in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

Bangladeshi immigrants who have settled in London begin to re-think about their culture, community, religion, language and identity that have produced a new kind of investigation among them. The Bangladeshi writers like Monika Ali played a vital role by voicing the bitter experiences of dislocation, immigration and identity crisis in a multicultural society of Britain. Although the novel focuses on Nazneen a central character, it provides very rich information about the life styles, work patterns, family structure, and cultural, social, economic and religious dynamics of the Bangladeshi community in Brick Lane. The present attempt highlights the diasporic identity of woman migrated from Bangladesh to Britain. It also reveals that the second-generation young Bangladeshis are distinct with their frequent clashes with their parents, their community or the British society at large. Some of them seek solace and solution either in alcohol, drugs and gangs or they unite in religious communities to endure, to oppose and to revolt against these grievances. Nazneen tries to cope with new cultural affiliations and new opportunities. While assimilating with values and patterns of new culture, she rejects her past traditions and customs. Her transgression creates the new attitude to look at the life. Nazneen's self awakening results from her sister Hasina, her daughters Bibi and Shahana and her close friend Razia. So she discovers a new world and a power within herself, the power of passion that shapes her own destiny. Ali shows a new Bangladeshi woman with awareness of Diaspora of self-identification.

Key words: Bangladeshi immigrants, diaspora identity, dislocation, cultural affiliation, *Brick Lane*, transgression.

Bangladeshi immigrants who have settled in London begin to re-think about their culture, community, religion, language and identity that have produced a new kind of investigation among them. These people really become conscious about their 'self-identity' while denying the 'imposed' one. The Bangladeshi writers like Monika Ali played a vital role by voicing the bitter experiences of dislocation, immigration and identity crisis in a multicultural society of Britain. The present attempt highlights the diasporic identity of woman migrated from Bangladesh to Britain. It also reveals that the second-generation young Bangladeshis are distinct with their frequent clashes with their parents, their community or the British society at large. Monica Ali being born in Dhaka in 1967 migrates with her parents to England when she was three years old. Her mother was English and her father Bangladeshi. She grew up in Bolton but has spent most of her life in London. She has been named one of Granta's "Best Young British Novelists" in 2003. Her first novel *Brick Lane* published by Doubleday in 2003 is originally called 'Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers', a title that alludes more generally to the distance between Sylhet and England. It portrays the lives of first and second generation Bangladeshi immigrants in the Tower Hamlets of Brick Lane in London from 1987 to 2003. Although the novel focuses on Nazneen a central character, it provides very rich information about the life styles, work patterns, family structure, and cultural, social, economic and religious dynamics of the Bangladeshi community in Brick Lane. The Bangladeshi people seek solace and solution either in alcohol, drugs and gangs or they unite in religious communities to endure, to oppose and to revolt against these grievances. *Brick Lane* records richly complex characters, a gripping story and an

exploration of a community that is so quintessentially British. It is a meditation on fate and free will. It is also funny and painful. Monika Ali elaborates the world of the Bangladeshi women who have changed their traditional or stereotypical image and projected themselves as modern in manners and attitudes.

Monika Ali speaks of the Bangladeshi woman who lives with diaspora identity resulted from her forced migration to Britain from Bangladesh. Diaspora is a state of living with the memories of homeland in alien country. It is a post-colonial paradigm first used to describe the Jewish dispersion in Babylonian times and then after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. It reveals the combination of migrancy and continued cultural affiliation that characterizes many racial, ethnic and national groups scattered throughout the world. The diasporic subject is seen to look in two directions—towards an historical cultural identity and the society of relocation. (Ashcroft ed. al, 425). It comprises the hybridity, scattering and exile. Diasporic writing becomes strategic because the identity of the diasporic subject is actively inscribed. It describes the difference of the re-located diasporic subject. The Bangladeshis always carry pangs and pains of their displacement and disruption and try to build their new identity. As an alien, they face the ill-treatment of natives or host or established people. The victimization of woman, as a 'woman' in the familial and social structure, and as an 'immigrant' in a foreign land shapes her diasporic identity. She migrates unwillingly with her husband by leaving her 'home' for 'host' to work for the better of family and children. She tries to cope with new cultural affiliations and new opportunities. While assimilating with values and patterns of new culture, she rejects her past traditions and customs. Her transgression creates the new attitude to look at the life. "The 'in-between' position of the migrant, and his or her errant, impartial perception of the world, have been used as the starting point for creating new, dynamic ways of thinking about identity." (Mcleod, 216).

Brick Lane, as a distinct and prime novel, focuses almost exclusively on the lives of Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets. It aims, not only to articulate the Bangladeshi women's fears and desires, but also to portray them as free to voice their injustices in Third World tradition. Beginning in 1967 in the Mymensingh district of East Pakistan, which four years later would become Bangladesh, it tells a story of Nazneen, a poorly educated young girl who is married off to Chanu, an overweight windbag twenty years older than her whom she accompanies back to the East End, where he has been living for some time. The transition from the slow rhythms of village life to the accelerated London of 1985 proves difficult. Chanu's dreams are more than he can achieve. Husband and wife struggle to provide for their two daughters and their only son dies in infancy. Nazneen stays at home during the day, has few friends other than Razia, who goes around wearing a Union Jack sweatshirt, and is locked into a chafingly dull existence until, in 2001; she falls in love with a sweatshop-owner's nephew, Karim. Their clandestine affair takes place against a background of increasing Islamisation, which Karim himself tries to stoke.

Being an old-fashioned tale the present novel projects a contemporary theme of a floundering woman's coming to feminist consciousness. It records the process, by which she moves, fitfully and self-lacerating, 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. Ali seems to be very much inclined towards this transformation. At the outset Nazneen's mother tells relatives: 'My child must not

waste any energy fighting against Fate. That way, she will be stronger.’ (Ali, *Brick Lane*: p-17). After a few years in London, Nazneen still can’t find the words for ‘this shapeless, nameless thing that crawled across her shoulders and nested in her hair and poisoned her lungs, that made her both restless and listless’. It’s only after she meets Karim that she hears a new vocabulary, some of which she relates to her own problems – ‘Radical was a new word for Nazneen’ – and by the end of the book she’s bopping up and down to Lulu’s ‘Shout’. Nazneen’s transformation into an independent and self-reliant woman after her arrival in London suggests that displacement can be an empowering mode of interaction with the outside world. She sacrifices her old culture and denies returning to Bangladesh with her husband. She transforms herself into a new strong person after stepping out of her domestic sphere into an alien country. Nazneen’s liberation and freedom, according to Ali, is result of her exposure to the West that was the center of attraction for the colonial nation. Ali depicts the loneliness and disappointment of the Bangladeshi woman who is displaced and isolated from the society around her. In London, she has limited contacts like waving to a tattooed, white woman at the window in the neighbourhood flat. In her migrant life, for the first time, she feels happy to interact with people from outside her domestic sphere. When she walks through the streets of London “She began to feel a little pleased. She had spoken, in English, to a stranger, and she had been understood and acknowledged. It was very little. But it was something.” (*Brick Lane* 57). Nazneen’s walk through the streets of London empowers her and denotes a change in her character. She becomes a confident woman. She forcefully tells her husband that the women are not incapable of doing things without the help of a man. As she says:

“Anything is possible. She wanted to shout it. Do you know what I did today? I went inside a pub ... I walked mile upon mile; probably around the whole of London ... I found a Bangladeshi restaurant and asked directions. See what I can do!” (*Brick Lane* 59).

Nazneen’s exploration of self emerges out of her first step into the public sphere of life that too posing a challenge to her dominating husband. The representation of Nazneen as a typical mother and an obedient wife depicted by the sentence “Nazneen always walked one step behind him” (*Brick Lane* 90) can be replaced by her rational and radical nature acquired from Western culture and English identity. The western land which is culturally more flexible than her own country, gives her freedom and scope to think about the possibilities beyond mere playing the roles of mother, wife and daughter. Thus, the identity of a woman is not fixed rather it keeps on changing, depending on historical, cultural, geographical and local contexts.

Her patriarchal husband becomes angry when Nazneen begins to learn the English language. To him, learning English is rejection of his dominance. Razia, another Bangladeshi woman, is seen as a threat to this denial to his wife that Chanu has designed as she constantly inspires and encourages Nazneen to learn English: “Razia is going to college to study English ... will it be all right for me to go to the college with Razia for the English lessons?” (*Brick Lane* 75). The reinforcement of patriarchy of a South Asian husband rejects her permission to learn in London. But Nazneen challenges the symbols that restricts her and pulls her back from getting acclimatized to British culture. She thinks her sari as a notion of slavery. So she rejects it. Ali portrays Nazneen’s anger towards her sari in the following way when Nazneen looks into the mirror:

“Suddenly, she was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes, her entire life would change as well. If she wore a skirt and a jacket and a pair of high heels, then what else would she do but walk around the glass places on Bishops gate and talk into a slim phone and eat lunch out of a paper bag? If she wore trousers and underwear, like the girl with the big camera on Brick Lane, then she would roam the streets fearless and proud.” (*Brick Lane* 297).

The codes imposed upon the women by Bangladeshi culture are rejected and the new British cultural codes accepted. Nazneen’s changing of dress code brings fearlessness and proud to her. So she accepts British trousers and underwear instead of Bangladeshi sari and a jacket for her emancipation.

Nazneen’s journey is mirrored by that of her sister Hasina back in Bangladesh. She’s beautiful and feisty, rather than plain and passive, and she elopes at an early age with the nephew of a sawmill owner. But the following years bring misfortune more grievous than any in London. She runs away from a violent husband, is raped, works in a factory, turns to prostitution and becomes a maid. These vicissitudes, along with those of her friend Monju are recounted to her sister in long letters written in pidgin English. It is an odd decision, given that Nazneen speaks Bengali at home and that, on the page, the tragic correspondence looks banal and comic. It also aspires to a scope, both in chronology and in cartography that the book does not manage. The letters do, however, go a long way to dispel the idea that Bangladesh is still rural, paradisaal. It is urban, violent and locked into the global capitalist system – Britney Spears’s face is familiar to the people of Dhaka, and Pantene Head and Shoulders hair contests are held at the capital’s Sheraton Winter Garden.

The novel focuses on Nazneen and her personal change as a result of her marriage, her move to Britain, her relationship with her husband and her lover, her discontent and her emancipation. Ali portrays young Bangladeshis, Shahana, Shefali, Azad who were born and raised in Britain and therefore adapted to British culture, British society and British identity as they voice their distaste with Bangladeshi culture, language and life style. Ali speaks of Bangladeshi girls who resemble British girls of their age by their interests, clothes, tastes, education, linguistic skills, and manners as they have been exposed to the hegemonic effects of British society and culture since they were born.

The second generation Bangladeshi girls began to learn English as their second language and spoke English fluently. So they got an opportunity to show their difference. As Shahana shows her difference and becomes critical of her parents while having British education at school. Chanu a father of Shahana and Bibi tries to keep his daughters away from speaking English at home. His fury stems from his assumption that the girls fit Karim’s pejorative description of westernized girl who “wears what she likes, all the make-up going on, short skirts and that soon as she is out of her father’s sight. She’s going out, getting good jobs, having a laugh” by speaking their language and by imitating their behavior, manners and tastes (Ali, 384).

Nazneen follows old culture but the new girls accept the new culture wholly. Unlike her mother, Shahana refuses to wash her hair with liquid hair and demands shampoo and moisturizer for her skin. When Chanu attempts to teach her daughters how to use a computer and have an access to internet, he is surprised to see that Shahana knows much more about computers than her father. Shahana refuses to wear traditional Bangladeshi clothes and insists on wearing jeans and skirts like her British

friends at school. She is one of the second-generation immigrants who are “stranded between two cultures, in conflict with their parents, facing difficulty of negotiating two incommensurable value systems. The problem was that they might not integrate smoothly into British society; the authoritarian and old-fashioned cultures of their parents deemed to be holding back” (Parker, 1995; 12). It seems unlikely that shy Nazneen would look at a man for long enough to build him up detail by detail. And as a way of indicating the process by which she acquired a working knowledge of the city around her, it rings untrue. White chapel jumps its residents and it forces newcomers to assimilate extremely fast. ‘Absence of decoration’, a phrase Ali uses to describe some of the restaurants along Brick Lane, makes her neighbourhood seem tamer than it is, and drags her to the edge of melodrama when she wants to register suffering Nazneen is ‘trapped inside this body, inside this room, inside this flat, inside this concrete slab of entombed humanity’ with Karim ‘her life had become bloated with meaning and each small movement electrified.’

Chanu rarely loses heart, however, as we see most memorably in an account of a day trip to Buckingham Palace. He wants his family to learn about the real London, to catch a moment of happiness in the face of immigrant adversity, to experience the pleasure of peering at England rather than being interrogated by English people. To this end, he buys compass, binoculars, a pair of khaki shorts ‘The girls would enjoy themselves. They were forewarned of this requirement.’ The whole day, for Nazneen above all, is an eye-opener, both lovely and tense. She is not used to lolling in the grass, and can’t avoid thinking about her secret boyfriend. They get a tourist to take a photo of them all together, the first and only one, but after it’s developed ‘nothing could be made out except for the feet.’ For Nazneen, Karim offers permission to dream about another world beyond the sink estate. Nazneen could easily have been felled by loneliness and the feeling she has that ‘hope and despair are nothing against the world and what it holds and what it holds for you’. But although much of her life is an object lesson in passivity, her character is honed by experience, grows less soft around the edges and turns out to be full of courage. Ali ends the novel while describing Nazneen with an image of ‘a sari-wearing ice-skating woman’ who is firm on her feet but preparing to launch out onto the precarious ice of experience. Thus, Ali shows a new Bangladeshi woman with awareness of Diasporic identity. Ali in her novel projects a female character Nazneen who constructs and reconstructs her individual identity in her everyday life. Nazneen is created as a woman determined by strategies of resistance, escaping from traditional space, using sexuality in order to move beyond restrictions imposed on her. She transgresses the boundaries fixed on her by gender, culture, caste and economic status. She renegotiates the space in which she actually resides. She struggles for the gendered space in her ‘home’ as both security and prison.

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