

The Rubric of Geography, Identity and Human Relationships: A Study of the Ethnic Mosaic in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

Multiculturalism or the political settlement of minorities became a major demand in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Particularly in connection to post immigrant groups by early the twenty-first century in Western Europe, it was related with Muslims. The idea of multiculturalism in contemporary political conversation and in political philosophy considers a debate about how to recognize and respond to the challenges connected with cultural diversity based on ethnic, national and religious contrast. This paper makes an attempt to shed light on the theme of multiculturalism in Brick Lane by Monica Ali. In Brick Lane, the novelist narrates both the spatial and metaphysical geography of Bangladeshi immigrants. She portrays the problems facing the women of different cultural or racial groups. There is a constant concern over women's nomadic existence in patriarchal society and over their extreme loss of reliance and cultural belonging. The writer of the novel marks out the theme of displacement and separation through the character of Nazneen, a young Bangladeshi woman. Ali particularly concentrates on how the protagonist, Nazneen, who creates an identity for herself despite challenges in an alien land with different cultural codes and backgrounds.

Keywords: multiculturalism, minorities, post-immigrant, cultural diversity, diaspora, racial, nomadic, displacement, separation, cultural belonging

1. Introduction

The phrase multiculturalism has a wide of connotation within the context of sociology or political philosophy. Multiculturalism relates to the co-existence of various cultures, where culture consists of racial, religious or cultural groups. It is manifested in customary behaviors, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking and styles of free speaking. The term multiculturalism represents a society where many cultures live together. The existence of such a society is possible when the cultural communities are accepted by the large society in a pluralist culture and often need the protection of the law. A pluralist society can be possible when people

from different countries migrate to one place and start to live together. A multicultural society would be formulated of people from dissimilar ethnic backgrounds and cultures, living and working together. In a pluralistic society people from different backgrounds connect with each other's culture.

2. Introducing Monica Ali and Her World of Brick Lane

Monica Ali, from her first debut has been hailed by critics as that rare thing, “a writer who seemed to have found, right at the beginning of her career and with, absolute confidence, her own voice.” (Natasha Walter, *The Guardian*, 2006).

Monica Ali is a well-known Bangladeshi-born British writer and novelist. Ali is the daughter of English and Bangladeshi parents. When Ali was three, she moved to England. Monica Ali is an award winning, best-selling writer whose work has been translated into 26 languages. Her first novel *Brick Lane* (2003), is an epic Saga about a Bangladeshi family, who are living in the UK. By this novel Monica Ali tries to explore the experiences of immigrant's life in the UK. It was shortlisted for the 2003 Man Booker Prize for Fiction. In 2007 *Brick Lane* was adapted in a film of the same name. Monica Ali was named in 2003 by Grant Magazine as one of 20 ‘Best of Young British Novelist.’

Brick Lane, the title of the novel, refers to the name of a place in the Eastern part of London, where especially Bangladeshi community people are living. Today it is the heart of the city's Bangladeshi community mostly made Sylheti Bangladeshi and is known to some as Bangla town. It is popular for its many curry houses. The novel starts with the problematic birth of the main character, Nazneen, in 1967. The major part of the novel is related to the events after her arranged marriage. She married with a double aged man, Chanu. After her marriage she moves to England at the age of 18, with the little knowledge of English to live with her new life and unattractive husband Chanu: “The man she would marry was old. At least forty years old. He had a face like a frog. They would marry and he would take her back to England with him.” (BL:17). The story of her sister who remains in Bangladesh is carried out as an additional narrative through her letters. As Geraldine Bedell argues, the inclusion of her news means that the definition of belonging is put into further doubt: “The pull of home, and the push of it, is dramatized by Hasina, Nazneen's sister, who took her fate into her own hands and made a love match, only to see the marriage fall apart and her life spiral out of control.” (*The Observer*, 15 June 2003).

3. Intercultural Matrix in *Brick Lane*

According to Kim, “...the national identity encompasses intercultural ties such as assimilation, integration, incorporation, pluralism and separation. Multiculturalism merges individualistic belief... with contradictory statements of collective unity, in opposition to integration, which promulgates individualism, a cultural mentality that promotes individuality, personality, and personal accountability.” (Kim: 239). Integration emphasizes the need to manage the sometime

turbulent realities of political correctness and the attempt a form of resolution. Segregation leads to “us-against them” postures, calling for the greatest possible inter-group distance, and in some situations, personality and denigration, as well as aggression and fear (Kim: 240). Yasmin Hussain writes, “Culture is not transmitted genetically, it is inculcated by upbringing inside a given cultural context,” (Hussain 2016:3). The searching for identity in *Brick Lane* is not personal, but it based on the cultural identity of Bangladeshis in London.

M.K. Chakrabarti’s article “Mark Place and Multiculturalism” published in *Boston Review* (December,2003), compares *Brick Lane*’s modern day drawing room scenes to the insular and limited world of the Jane Austin novels with which he draws certain literary parallels, Nazneen, the main character lives in isolated and lonely world which is unchanged by the events outside of the Tower Hamlets in East London, where she lives in and spends her days alone in a small rented council flat. The lack of language can have certain negative effects on how the user recognizes the world. Nazneen’s language abilities do affect her capability to connect outside of her own ethnic community.

In this context, Homi. K. Bhabha suggests his individual theory, which precedes a dissimilar perspective of together the imperial “subject” and the imperial nation-state, which is based on Jacques Derrida’s techniques for dissecting Said’s theory of culture. Bhabha (1994) addresses the “numinous” meditation of cultural identity through difference in ethnicity, class, gender and cultural norms in his reference to *The Position of Culture*. Bhabha recommends that cultural identification is negotiated through the Yusuf National Culture in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*: Bhabha ...17 a continuous exchange of cultural performances that leads to reciprocal acceptance of cultural difference. This “numinous” space is a “hybrid” location where cultural significance is created: “The portrayal of distinction should not be viewed hastily as a result of pre-determined racial or cultural characteristics carved in stone by tradition. From the viewpoint of the minority, social enunciation of distinction is a dynamic, continuing negotiation that aims to permit social hybridity that occur through historical transitions.”

The very title of the novel is taken from a street that lies between White Chapel Road and Liverpool Street in London. A huge number of Bangladeshis people who moved in Britain after 1970 left their cultural and religious mark on this neighborhood, which was earlier a safe house for Protestants and Jews. The Bangladeshi community bought the synagogue in 1976 and it became an Islamic place of worship for Bengalis. In *Brick Lane*, the main character, Nazneen’s life shifts and symbolizes hope to overcome religious and ethnic boundaries. The novel speaks for Nazneen’s struggle for identity in a globalized society of the 21st century, where disparate people are living from different cultures. The novel opens in a rural village of Bangladesh, named Gouripur, where Rupban is going into labor two months early with the birth of her eldest daughter Nazneen. Everyone on hand at the birth, including Rupban's sister-in-law, Mumtaz and the village midwife, Banesa thinks Nazneen is going to die until she begins Kicking and screaming. Instead of taking Nazneen to a hospital, Rupban decides to leave her daughter to her fate. Unexpectedly, Nazneen survives and grows up into a plain, thoughtful child who loves her

mother and decides that almost everything in life should be left to God. At the age of eighteen she gets married to Chanu and moved to London.

The protagonist of the novel is Nazneen. She was young, an immigrant and was unknowing of the English language and culture. When Nazneen came to London she was more familiar with two English words. They were “thank you” and “sorry”. However, she agrees to receive the cross-culturalism in her surroundings in London and discovers her new identity in the third space of the metropolis. She tries to examine the other side of life in London, which permits women to work and live independently (Mortada, 2010). She begins to sew clothes for getting money. It helps her to be economically independent and support her family. In a global metropolitan space, Nazneen makes an effort to discover a new Global identity and settles down in the same place which makes her feel alien at times. She denies Bangladesh's patriarchal socio-cultural code and begins to live in the metropolis without her husband.

Being self-supporting has positive results on Nazneen's life. She makes an effort to gain her identity and freedom through the work of sewing clothes. She wishes to stand on her own feet and lead a free life. Nazneen's seeking for identity and freedom progresses through three main plot lines: the affair with Karim, the potential return to Bangladesh planned by Chanu to buy a computer and perhaps more importantly, the sewing machine of the villainous Mrs. Islam. The incrimination of all three stories involves Nazneen's seeking for self-identity. On the other hand, Nazneen's ambitious husband, Chanu has a degree from Dhaka University and has shown up to many English classes to increase his capabilities. When Chanu arrived in London, his only vision was to get respect not only by the Bangladeshi community but also by British citizens. By starting a public library, he projects the idea to teach his individuals, but he is incapable to finish the project. Chanu's dreams never came true, so he gave up his dreams and starts a new career as a taxi driver. Chanu argues to be westernized in the novel, but in a telephone conversation that Nazneen heard soon after their marriage, he describes his wife, Nazneen, as a material. Chanu is an embattled figure who lurches desperately between an outdated apparitional Englishness and a self-educated version of himself.

4. The Parallel Lines: Rushdie, Kureishi and Ali

Monica Ali follows the tradition of Salman Rushdie(1997-) and Hanif Kureishi(1954-) who had placed Islam back into the English-Speaking novel thus showing that the modern English novel is heavily persuaded by migrant writers coming from the former colonies. These writers share a double vision of England simply because they are insiders and outsiders at the same time. In their characters are very convincing and they bring out Islam to the Western reader, a religion which for such a long time has been conferred in a stereotyped and thus negative way: Ali's main accomplishment, however, lies in her image of a Muslim woman who picks up the West as a possibility. Ali here be different from male Muslim writers who too often confront the reader with the failure of their character. Ali's conception of a Muslim woman appears to have been a frontrunner for other Muslim writers to come after. Writer like Leila Abdouleta (*Minaret* 2005),

Tahmima Anam (*A Golden Age* 2007), (*The Good Muslim* 2011), Fadia Faquir (*My Name is Salma* 2007) followed Ali in their submission of female Muslim identity.

In the novel, Ali makes use of the image of a modern Muslim woman as some kind of door opener for other Muslim women in order to throw back the traditional image of female presentation and representation in the Western and the Muslim worlds alike. The first years in England are marked by a solitary and social isolation for Nazneen. The causes can be seen in her husband's reaction to make her stay at home, her traditional role as a woman and mother and the cultural dissimilarity between her Bangladeshi and her British surroundings. All the connection to the outer world is arranged by her husband. Nazneen, nevertheless, is happy with her life that is put in order around house work and bringing up her children (BL:40-41). The basis for this positive attitude is her religion (BL:41). Islam gives her strength, orientation, comfort and an ethnic background. Her husband, Chanu, upholds the isolation with the support of his male Muslim traditional thinking and a seemingly intellectual feeling of superiority (BL:45). During her first years in England, Islam remains her only moral support, and reading the Qur'an throw backs her longing for and her understanding of a better future (BL:57). This feeling culminates in a sense of social isolation (BL:58), which is shown in her letters to Hasina, her sister back home. It is also her sister who helps her out to manage this phase of her life. Slowly but steadily Nazneen sets about to reflect her traditional role as a wife and mother, but her first attempt to change it fail, because her husband is not reluctant to try changes in his wife. He advises her to stay in her traditional role (BL:77) and characterizes her present status quo quite well with a quote from Shakespeare (BL:92).

Nazneen, however, begins her liberation process, taking herself off from her traditional family position and the role as a female Muslim immigrant. She carefully connects another group of Muslim women and starts to make out things differently (BL:102). This also adds a critical analysis of Islam. A major step in her Independence process is her participation in a more male oriented group where she joins open discussion on politics (BL:113-114). She is supported by her friend Razia. Being a widow, Razia is capable in managing her life alone. The negative development of her sister's life back home in Bangladesh also helps Nazneen make a critical analysis of her former life. On the other hand, Chanu is fired from his job, where he works as a clerk and he tries to start different jobs, yet fails, mainly because he doesn't face the real world and is still too much associated in his Muslim structures. Chanu loses his position as a 'middleman' and has to make way for Karim, the young man, to whom Nazneen picks to be her lover. Karim is "a new middleman" (BL:209). Nazneen is fascinated by Karim, who is young, attractive, religiously involved and more British, than Bangladeshi (BL: 210-211). Nazneen is so attracted to him that she starts to betray her husband in her mind (BL:219-220). Karim, a representative of Bengali history and culture is in the same situation with Chanu that he cannot win himself a position in Britain. In this novel, Karim is a man with faith and willing to listen people's proposal. He is one of the second generation of Bengali immigrants, so he is at first considered as a highly Westernized man by Nazneen. However, during the way to set up cultural identity, Karim is lost in the conflict of the traditional Bengali culture and Western culture.

Nationalism, which is fully manifested in his character, witnesses his changes in the process of searching for the Bengali root. Karim together with Chanu cannot build his cultural identity in the end, so he has to go back to Bangladesh, as well.

On the other hand, Nazneen be fond of her newly achieved freedom (BL:277-278). Her curiosity in political and religious activities around Karim can also be seen as important steps in her emancipation from conversational and traditional Islam, since she fully joins a man's world (BL:236). She comes across her full female strength. The transition from sari to Western clothes can be seen as a symbolic act of liberation (BL: 277-278). She finally realizes that she has to reject both men in order to begin a new life with her children. At the end of the novel, Nazneen has finally reached the destination of her personal voyage. She has grown from a traditional, devout and strictly religious Muslim woman to a modern type of immigrant who is able to look after herself. Nazneen is the role model of an Islam that can be found in Tunisia, Turkey or Western countries and she simply delights this open and dynamic part of her religion (BL:491). In the end of the novel, Nazneen is introduced herself as a modern Muslim woman on her way to be accepted socially, culturally and politically. She lives and practices bi-culturalism as a positive way of life.

5. Conclusion

Through the novel, the novelist attempts at presenting the different challenges and opportunities which is followed by the different characters of the novel and they have responded the multiculturalism scenario in different ways. Characters like Nazneen, Chanu and Karim, who have been surviving the set up in the multiculturalism society in Britain. Brick Lane is a place, where various ethnic backgrounds can live together to enjoy their differences. Here, Monica Ali presents the theme of multiculturalism through the character of Nazneen, Chanu, Karim, Mrs. Islam, etc. She reveals the disputes of the two cultures that are between the West and the East. By the novel, the novelist tries to portray the struggle of different characters in the new society of British. On the other-hand Nazneen creates a new identity that is half Bangladeshi and half British. Nazneen keeps her Bangladeshi style of life and goes to works and makes her own decision. The novel focuses on the struggle of different characters in the new society of British, where Nazneen is able to create her own identity. On the other hand, the male characters like Chanu and Karim fail in establishing their cultural and social identity. Cultural clash between both the genders is apparently visible in the novel too.

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