

Reassessing the Floating Constructs in the Select Novels of Monika Ali and Manjushree Thapa

Shibu Gorai

PG Student in English
The University of Burdwan
Burdwan, West Bengal

Abstract

Marriage, conventionally in India is believed to be a social institution. Women are supposed to be carried to their husbands' places to secure their cultural identity as well as financial security. Women are subjugated on the basis of class, gender, and culture. In this essay, we will see how the identity of a woman is getting thrice removed from herself due to the dependence on her father, husband, and, son during her autumnal years. We will see the very notion of home and the world how flexible and can transform according to time, place, and formation of individuality. Home means a four-walled dwelling place but it can also connote ease, comfort, and relaxation. The world, for a woman, is not safe as preached by patriarchy. The world appears dreary, uncanny, and not safe to women conventionally. But we will take up references to show how the women dare to deviate from the prejudiced societal norms to assert their identity, to mark their characteristics, and thus to show their capability. Therefore, we will focus on *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monika Ali and *Seasons of Flight* (2010) by Manjushree Thapa to mark the fluid identities of the women characters which will assist them to reassert their superiority. Identity formation will transcend the characters irrespective of class and gender.

Keywords: Marriage migration, internal diaspora, gender, patriarchy, feminism, identity

Introduction:

The word 'diaspora' is of Greek origin which broadly means to "scatter through/across". In time, the term has gained a lot of significance to suggest a migration of people from one place to another. This can be of several types. For our discussion, I would like to introduce 'internal diaspora' which roughly denotes a migration of the self into another form. This idea of moving from one space within to another internally may be termed as the internal diaspora.

Now, we can focus on the aspects of marriage. Marriage is a social construct. It is based on the idea of the mutual contract between both sides of the couple in mostly South Asian Countries. Sometimes, it takes place as a means to secure one's livelihood by way of dealing. A woman is expected to be beautiful, calm, and serving by other families in some cases. A man, on the contrary, has to do with the outer world like he has to run a business or he should have a secured job. This is how marriage takes place with the needs of both sides.

The concept of home and the world is here very pertinent. What home means to one may appear world to other and vice versa. A Home that generally suggests a living place can

transform into a place where peace and prosperity prevail. Home, therefore, can suggest a place to feel, to enjoy, and to live in prosperity. But these fluid names may vary from person to person. The world can suggest a place of outer reality, space that demands masculinity and at the same time provokes to oppress femininity. The world is mostly occupied by men to have control over women in particular and power in general. This essay will introduce us to the idea of home and the world and how it gets changed if there comes a dilemma or need. For an unmarried girl, a home can be her father's place, for a married woman a home can be her husband's house, and for a widow, the home can be her son's residence. And whenever there is room for change, the other becomes the world.

Due to the flexibility of the home and the world, there comes the role of gender which is a cultural and social construction. Gender is an attribution given by society, unlike sex which implies a biological entity. Gender can be changed and reframed but sex probably is not. Patriarchy and gender go hand in hand in the construction of the male-centric view of the world. Women are trying to escape from this hegemonized notion of society by asserting and claiming their basic needs and equal distribution of power. Feminism asks us to look at the gendered identities and form an egalitarian society.

Critical analysis of the novels:

Brick Lane (2003) is a narrative of a newly married couple who left Bangladesh to settle in London for job security and leading a better version of lives. The novel introduces Nazneen who gets married to Chanu, a man twice her age. This marriage is thought to be a successful one as it is based on the so-called societal norms. But, we find, Nazneen in London feels alienated and wants to return her home in the beginning. She is confused and does not able to make anyway to settle in a multicultural country. Her husband forces her in many ways to stay there and to become a slave to patriarchy. The problem for her husband begins when Nazneen starts to see her reflection through the window to have a new identity of her own. The window here is symbolic and it marks the entrance for Nazneen in search of a new life which will be devoid of barrier and restriction of her husband. She opens up her space and comes across Razia, who becomes her friend in that hostile country. In this way, she sees Karim and feels drawn to him. Even, her bringing of a new sewing machine may connote her independence through economic stabilization.

Nazneen now feels at home but in an earlier case, she was feeling down-trodden. We can here understand the metamorphosis in Nazneen which is interesting to see. This transformation is due to her entry into the outside world and companionship with Karim which voices her needs and inspired her in many ways.

Simon de Beauvoir declares in her debut *The Second Sex* (1949) that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (283). The nexus between construction and the established norm is crucial. The established notions always violate the free-thinking and imprison the subject. The statement is here characteristic of Nazneen's cooperation with the society as well with herself to come out of the patriarchal border and subjugation.

Consciousness-raising is a part of radical feminism which is greatly scored and obtained by Nazneen. It can take place through various activities like group discussion, social outing, and forming new friendships. Here, with Karim, she dresses herself to fight for the hostile outside

space. Her identity shifts from an obedient housewife to an earning mother who involves herself in social activities also with Karim's political party. Even, at a former stage, she is threatened by her husband with a warning that she should not use the English language always. In a foreign country like London, Nazneen is not expected to know the culture and ways to converse with people. So, language also works as a means of escaping patriarchy and exert her individuality. Mary Daly, in *Gyn/Ecology* (1987) underlines the oppression practised by patriarchy through language. Language is, therefore, an eventual medium to escapade from domination, subjugation and domestic slavery.

“A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (1973:6) opined by Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One's Own* (1929). So true in case of Nazneen but in a nuanced way if she has to feature her personality. Here, what Woolf comments are relevant as Nazneen tries to secure her income and financial stability. It is the patriarchy which hinders her to earn that liberation. If Nazneen has to live her life independently, free of anxiety, dominance and dependency she must consider her sewing machine as a weapon to fight against any odds. This would somehow work for her societal prestige and improve her psychological state and thus secure a room of her own.

Thapa's novel is also wrapped with feminine perspectives. To delve into the worlds of home and exile, gender, feminism, we need to look at the central character Prema from a subjective point of view. Thapa herself portrays through this fiction the narrative of her life while she was in exile in the United States leaving her name in Nepal. The protagonist, Prema, and other characters show their destined duties by the patriarchy can be reframed and reset. Prema, who is a young energetic girl leaves her school to study further in abroad. She does not believe in any prejudice or fallacy. She unlike other girls does not choose her life to be submitted to the male centred chauvinist world. Prema moves to America without informing her father whom she later used to deliver money to serve him better. But she cannot move to the village to see or meet her father. She was working in a restaurant independently and thereby earning her freedom. The problem which Prema faces and tackles is noticed long ago by Virginia Woolf thus: “They need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do, they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation” (822). Here, Woolf strongly addresses woman question and the role prescribed by patriarchy. She is highly condemning the way woman suffers from the dilemma like whether to settle independently or to subscribe to the idea of the male chauvinism. But unlike these characteristics, the protagonist Prema can able to overcome all the miscarriages that she faces and waits for further development.

Prema appears to be very opposite of those women whom Showalter (1992) opined that they “...have been cast in the supporting rather than the starting roles of literary scholarship” (1225). She is too indifferent to the traditional woman roles has moved to America. There she keeps on having affairs with more than one partners just to deviate from the societal norms and the ideals of conventionality. Before moving to the USA, she had encountered sexual relationships with Rajan without marrying him. She, thus, violates the conventional patriarchal norms.

Prema faces a lot of challenges while trying to compose a stable identity of her own. For instance, during her early childhood days, the home may be for her the dwelling place preserved by her father who not only then safeguards her but supports her mentally. When she grows up and decides to work at a restaurant, the money that she receives from her boss

reminds her of the comfort that she can able to provide her father. So, we can see for Prema again the known home becomes the external world and the outer space transforms into a home. That home is represented by the hot restaurant where she works and earns her livelihood. But her lover Rajan cannot impose any identity on her as she is sexually and financially becoming independent. She does not think of relying on only one man and stays with him for a lifetime. She rejects the idea of monogamy and she breaks this kind of Victorian conformity. In this way, she succeeds to achieve her confirmed success through the formation of fluid identities. As Nadjie-Al-Ali points out that women are not ‘passive victims’ on the opposite, they have “articulated various degrees of agency” (119).

Prema like Jasmine in Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* (1989) decides not to be the other in a hegemonic patriarchal society. Jasmine is willingly agreed to live without the supposed protection of any male. Al-Ali is here noteworthy to point out the aspect of ‘degree of agency’ which help those suppressed women to come out of oppression. Prema is a brilliant instance who neglects passivity to embrace active participation in the formation of her future decorum. This is so true as we have seen in America, too, she is having a relationship with Luis and they both live together without the marriage key. But Prema after staying with him for days is being informed by Luis that he wants to buy a new car and house to have an up-gradation of their daily life. Then Prema begins to suffer from an inferiority complex as she feels that she cannot contribute to the demands of Luis. Eventually, she abandons him to seek to have her individuality.

Betty Friedan, the writer of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) opines that “The feminine mystique, the highest value and the only commitment for a woman is the fulfilment of their femininity...Beneath the sophisticated trapping it simply makes certain concrete, finite domestic aspects of feminine existence...into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity” (213). Friedan’s take on a woman is relevant for avoiding femininity to transcend individualism. If a woman has to take care of her household activities, she may not escape her femininity. The very roles which a woman has to perform while remaining in a domestic space work as a hindrance to her individuality, self-exploration and a choice of her own. These domestic agencies work as a religion to subvert her choice and wishes. Therefore, to make the family comfortable and happy, a woman has to accept all the impositions of patriarchy at one level and society on others. So, these platforms pave the way for worshipping of what she could get in her life. This is also a kind of internal diasporic space in which a woman is supposed to undergo various psychological transformations, change of choice and subversion of her own desired destinations. As a woman, one cannot go beyond gender as it is imposed by society. Society works to impose roles and frames which a woman has to wear to perform the provided. Friedan suggested denying one’s femininity to go for a transformation of the rigid role model nourished and pampered by patriarchy.

“As a woman, I have no country, as a woman, I want no country” (1938:109) declared by Virginia Woolf. To secure a utopian state or space for a woman is to think of going beyond the limited hegemonic beliefs of conventionality. Woolf meticulously portrays nation as a prison which enslaved women’s liberation. It is not only the defined nation but also the same which intrinsically subjugates its subjects. As a woman, Woolf asks no country and emphasizes on the liberation and freedom of living at nowhere. The place or idea of utopia implies a space which does not exist in reality and also a place known for its ideals, beauty and aesthetics. The democratic ideal space, therefore, we can speculate does not have any

existence which time and again is searched and demanded by women. The women can only imagine and reassert their identities but this demand cannot be fulfilled as long as they fear to neglect their fixed known role. The culture, society, politics and patriarchy go hand in hand without blinking an eye to the needs of the women. The utopian state is, therefore, only exists in the mind and not in actuality. We could feel the demands of the suppressed or subjugated but fail to notice the immediate transformation which should be wrought by society. And we should not forget to mention society is to mark its people. Society cannot exist without its people. It is not an abstract idea altogether. So, society in general and people living, in particular, could be held responsible for the mishaps perpetually performed towards women. Woolf for this reason restricts herself to inhabit a hegemonic or culturally, socially, politically and psychologically a male-centric world. Monika Ali's protagonist might have encountered this kind of cultural domination and thereby tries to transcend her body as well as her mind. There are so many ways with which a woman is controlled and among them, gender is one such. Nazneen explores the outer world and she feels then the need to free her affairs with Karim and does not feel the burden and pain to that extent a submissive woman is expected to.

We can bring here Kamala Markandaya who wrote *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) and her novel the protagonist Rukmini is a victim to patriarchy and she makes the statement that she has never mentioned her husband's name to call him. She is proud of it as she surrenders herself before her husband. We do not know or only can assume if it is an honour or enslavement to call a husband by his name. There are certain beliefs and prejudices thrown at women and if they try to violate them, they may be considered as impure and unchaste by society. That is why Rukmini revered her husband so honourably and feels confident and proud to be controlled and subjugated by her confidant. It is, therefore, the role of identity politics which is responsible for the inhumanity and victimization of women. Women see that there is a need to neglect space to live in it. They change their politics to deviate from the supposed code of conduct to exist in society. We can see why diasporic consciousness comes into close contact with vis-à-vis women.

We should take a look at the data that will show us the constant migration of women only due to marriage. As many as 20.58 crores women in India migrated for marriage, the census data shows which implies that almost 70 per cent women have to displace themselves only because of marriage. So, the women who are vulnerable to these practices seem to be disengaged to their former selves. They are as if living in a no man's land which cannot give them a stable identity of their own so that they can settle to establish themselves. Our concern is now only with the numbers of women who are losing their identities due to the conventional attitude of society that women will have to migrate from their fathers' residences. Thapa shows in her female protagonist Prema a reversal of norms and ideologies. Patriarchy says to migrate, but she, on the contrary, left to settle in a cosmopolitan city only to establish her identity. It is not that Prema listens to the conventionality and surrenders before a man. We can observe that Prema keeps affairs with several men and does not care to leave one just to give a threat to the society and to bring a new millennium where women will be free to choose what they want and they will be capable of challenging the rigid typical beliefs and codes of conduct.

In Ali's novel, we also find that Nazneen first surrenders herself but later disengaged herself from all sorts of dominance and psychological colonization. Nazneen marries Chanu based

on societal conformity and seems to be happy in the beginning. She migrated with him to land in a foreign country far from her father's place which displaces her mind to live in an alien land. But she has the unconquerable will which helps her to redeem herself from the shackles of burden and despair. Even she faces a disastrous terrorist attack there which may be interpreted as the internal destruction and disaster in her mind. But she overcomes all these dangerous paths and settles herself in a way to embrace any culture and way of living. Her husband realizing the fatal disaster there wants to come back to his motherland as to secure himself from any kind of mishap. But he can very well avoid the external mishap by returning but cannot finally able to calm down Nazneen to return with him. Nazneen finally can able to mark her identity there and refuses to participate in the process of identity demolition. Her new identity in the unknown land also helps her to stay there and she refuses to submit herself before patriarchy.

“I have become a queer mixture of the East and the West out of place everywhere, at home nowhere...They are both parts of me...I am a stranger and alien in the West. I cannot be of it. But in my own country also, sometimes I have an exile's feeling” (596) declared by Jawaharlal Nehru in his autobiography. Nehru has rightly pointed out the very cosmopolitanism of diasporic identity. He describes himself as a stranger and alien in the West. He also envisages his feeling like an exile even in his own country. The pattern which one may try to fix one's identity in Nehru is relevant as it is present in almost every major character we have discussed. For example, Prema in Thapa can be regarded as one such. She tries her best to get out of her pristine identity. She cannot become forcibly become an alien unless she feels it at heart. The reason is to feel being an exile internally. She gets out of this exile's feeling in every possible way. She remembers the days she used to spare with her former self and becoming an independent one by embracing and mixing with the latter. This is so true in the case of Nazneen who also gets rid of her identity from being a passive one and later transforming herself to be an independent one who can give her feelings a free flow. The gendered identities of both the characters rely only on themselves to be decided on what they prescribed them upon based on their psychological formations. “I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to be the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance...” (295). Said, here, points out the embracing nature of one who belongs to nowhere.

Conclusion:

To sum up, the above-discussed characters Nazneen in Ali and Prema in Thapa undergo certain kinds of stereotypes which block their free spirits in the beginning. Migration and its impediments have a large impact on these characters as we have observed. Their assimilation into a foreign culture seems problematic but in course of time, we have seen how they concede cosmopolitanism. Patriarchy somehow works to subdue them and also the preamble of identity politics is crucial to mark. Despite all these convulsions, they endeavour to outstrip the traditional irrevocable stereotypes. In our discussion, the male characters of both the novels exert their utmost potentials but they fail to climb on their patriarchal carriage. It is interesting to note that though the variations may in the incipience terrify the female characters of both the novels but they come out of all odds. In this case, we can refer to Amartya Sen who declares that: “I can be at the same time, an Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bengali, with Bangladeshi country, an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in Philosophy, an author, a Sanskritist, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man,

a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights, with a non-religious lifestyle, from a Hindu background, a non-brahmin, and a non-believer in the afterlife” (38). The multidimensional identities of Sen are meticulously drawn here. The above characters such as Nazneen and Prema also accept and promote multiculturalism and thus able to defeat all discordances.

Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi K. *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. 85-92.
- Thapa, Manjushree. (2010) *Seasons of Flight*. New Delhi: Penguin/ Viking
- Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. New York: Scribner, 2003
- CLIFFORD, James. *Diasporas*. *Cultural Anthropology*, n. 9, v. 3, 1994, p. 302-338.
- Oonk, Gijisbert. *Global Indian Diasporas: Exploring Trajectories of Migration and Theory*: Amsterdam University Press, 2007. Print
- Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. London: Virago Press, 1991. Print.
- Lahiri, Himadri. *Diaspora Theory and Transnationalism*. Hyderabad. Orient Black Swan Private Limited, 2019. Print.
- Daly, Mary. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990. Print.
- De Beauvoir, Simon. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage, 1989. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own: Selected Works of Virginia Woolf*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2005. Print.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. *Jawaharlal Nehru, an Autobiography: With Musings on Recent Events in India*. London: John Lane, 1936. Print.
- Sen, Amartya. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006. Print.