

Shifting Cultures: Diaspora in Monica Ali's Brick Lane

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Abstract

The changing fashions of migration and the dwindling international borders have given a possibility to the inhabitants of different countries to discover world as the platform of the action. In the recent times, cultures are incessantly changing to give path to a multiethnic and a multicultural society. But sometimes this cultural difference gives way to a hard time of identity crisis.

Monica Ali's widely acclaimed novel Brick Lane conveys the story of Nazneen, a young Bangladeshi woman, married at 18 to Chanu Ahmed and thus drifts to London where they are squashed in between the native Bangladeshi identity and now a state of the art identity. It is not astonishing for the two to feel isolated and withdrawn both socially and culturally. This paper will make a deep study of the changes, which various characters in the novel undergo as a result of a shift in the culture because of immigration.

Keynotes: multicultural, immigration, identity crisis, etc.

Monica Ali's endorsement of liberalism stresses the universality of the yearning for freedom and sovereignty and seeks to throw light on the quandary of less authoritative population of non-western cultures, such as women, who are burdened by the customs and traditions of their cultures. Ali focuses her fictional gaze on the Bengali community in Britain. She in her influential work *Brick Lane*, has given the point of view of its chief protagonist, a Bangladeshi woman diaspora, Nazneen. The novel traces the journey of Nazneen from the rustic grounds of her homeland Gouripur in Bangladesh to the existing apartment in London's Brick Lane. Locked in an arranged marriage with an older man named Chanu, Nazneen sets on a metaphorical journey into an unacquainted path and subsequently discovers the hidden potential of her individual self. Far away from her birthplace she flourishes out of obedience and affirmation. The intricate personality of Chanu and his helplessness of adapting in the host society confused her to a great extent. Ali has tried to humanize her Muslim characters by bringing out their feelings of rage against the west and also by accentuating the values they propagate.



Nazneen is a representation of identity formation within various immigrant societies as individuals within those societies struggle between traditions, multiculturalism, and home longing as shown in Ali's novel.

Ali's narrative fiction discovers new foundations of diasporic identities within the urban spaces of London. *Brick Lane* is a narrow, half a mile long, innocuous lane in East London, known for its discrete character of being a mini- Bengal right in the heart of London where the Bengali diasporic population, chiefly Muslims from Bangladesh live. The title *Brick Lane* gives attention more to a representation of an interesting minority in London than any weak reference to an umbilical chord back home.

The book was originally named as "Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers," a literal translation of idiom in Bengali used to designate unimaginable distances in fairytales, between the mythical home of reminiscences back in Bangladesh and London: "A title that alludes more generally to the distance between Sylhet and England; the decision to give it a snappier, more happening, less accurate title is the publisher's." as Katy Gardner remarks in her article "Desh-Bidesh: Sylhet Images of Home and Away" that simply by ensuing inherent costumes and customs and manners

the diasporic Bengalis in London tries to stay a part of home country. Though most of them aspire to be in bidesh only but still they do not want to loose contact with desh. It is the wealth of Britain, which is, appreciated the most and not the British society as western culture is viewed as unscrupulous and corrupt.

The novel brings into glare the journey of Nazneen who has been taught well by her mother the importance of fate and submissiveness in a woman's life. Her mother was subjected to her father's domination that never allowed her to speak up her mind and feelings. As a result Nazneen's mother tried to mould the personality of her daughters Nazneen and Hasina accordingly. However, the multicultural environment of the west provides Nazneen the courage to challenge the hegemonic habits of both East and West. She is a poorly educated young girl of eighteen who is married off to Chanu, overweight arrogant man twenty years older and with a "face of a frog" (8). She feels home sick and in her dreams she always sees herself holding her sister's hand. In the company of neighborhood Bangladeshi women, she obtains an opportunity to speak in her native language, celebrate home festivals and shares the memories of land departed from her. Her husband Chanu

belongs to the first group of immigrants as it first appears in the novel. He explicates that the other occupants of Brick Lane, “all stick together because they come from the same district. They know each other from the villages, and they come to Tower Hamlets and they think they are back in the village” (20).

Bangladeshi women’s experience of relocation in the novel *Brick Lane* is different from that of the menfolk. Not only these women come face to face with new cultural surroundings, but also have to undergo gender discrimination from their husbands within the four walls of their house and society as well. The novel studies how the men in their own communities treat these women as alien by their host nation and as objects. She was not even allowed to pursue a job and got snubbed by her husband who in a complete denial said, ‘If you go out, ten people will say, I saw her walking on the street. And I will look like a fool’ (30). Women after marriage are not allowed to go out without escort as a result their economic and occupational spheres do not improve unless they are given a chance to receive education and training. Razia Iqbal, another woman like Nazneen, also an immigrant, faced a similar situation. It was only after her husband’s death she starts working in order to provide her family. Nazneen is even

repudiated when she asks her husband to allow her to learn English. When she informs Chanu about her desire to learn the language, her close-minded husband’s harsh rebuttal forces her to accept his command without putting any resistance. Nazneen here is seen as a symbol of subaltern who is not allowed to speak.

Towards the close of the novel, we notice an unpredicted transformation in the personality of Nazneen. She transforms from being a subaltern and subservient to a self-assertive and an independent woman. Whereas Chanu proves to be a cultural failure and his dream of being a successful man was never fulfilled, that is why he wanted to return to his country. But the second generation of diaspora viz, Shahana Ahmed and Bibi Ahmed unlike their father don’t wish to go back to Bangladesh. the hegemonic British culture has dissolved the effect of the culture of Bangladesh which Chanu has frantically been trying to inculcate.

Monica Ali has tactfully depicted various characters that are caught up in the worlds between their own origin and the adaptation to a new cultural setting. The novel is also a victory from a feminist point of view where all male characters fail in associating with their social and cultural identities while all the female characters



come off victorious in establishing their identities with intelligence and prudence.

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