

A Study on Cultural Identity in Monica Ali's Novels

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ABSTRACT

This paper endeavours to analyse the impact of cultural collision and cultural reorientation in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, which is packed with themes of cultural dislocation, displacement, change and continuity, strangeness and familiarity encountered by characters living in a complex and multicultural world. Interestingly, postcolonial society witnessed an upsurge of cross cultural fertilization of societies, which resulted in untold miseries of the people. Diaspora not only connotes demographic dislocations, but also cultural reorientation as the foreign culture impinges upon the native culture.

Keywords: Diaspora, Collision, Culture, Dislocation, Displacement, Reorientations

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity, in its broadest sense, may be characterized as a sense of belonging to a specific religious or political community. It is "the meaning of groups or persons... in context of racial or sub cultural divisions (including race, nationality, language, faith, and gender)," As per to the Oxford Dictionary of Information and Communication technology (Chandler, 2011: 137). Since culture includes everything about a society, it has a huge influence on an individual's identity. Wren (2002: 213) distinctions among "personal identity" along with "community" or "national identity" in "National Culture and Individual Identity," stating: "Rather, he encourages ethnic identity and collective identification to coexist (232). Personal/individual identification decides a person from others by identifying him or her; cultural identity denotes to a person's sense of be appropriate to a society, which is a portion of their individual identity; hence, personal and cultural identity are related but distinct.

Ethnic traditions can be pessimistic and even harmful at times, but they can also be positive and creative. One's favorite lifestyle is affected by their cultural background, and culture plays an important part in shaping one's identity. This is particularly true for refugees, who would require to alteration their culture in direction to well in with the western culture that the majority of the country's inhabitants practice. The customer has problems with this approach because he or she is supposed to make a complicated choice between two communities. Yusuf isn't to blame. *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali: Cultural Change from a Bhabhian Perspective 17 It is not mandatory to stick to a particular culture; certain individuals may adapt to a variety of cultures. Cultural identity isn't always fixed in stone, and it's not always immune to change or development. (Holliday 2010: 165- 177).

In the social sciences and post - colonial studies, notably postcolonial literature, cultural identity has taken centre stage. The differing or divergent viewpoints on cultural identities can be due to the substantial shifts in culture studies over the last few periods away from essentialist conceptions of culture, which dominated culture studies for the majority of the twentieth period, towards more pluralistic and numerous perspectives of culture. Erik Erikson (1950) was one of the first to investigate cultural identification. He saw identity formation as a phase in which individual and group identities fused into one. Later scholarly writings on ethnic identities have echoed Erikson's early identification conception. (Kim 2007: 240). Given the diversity of viewpoints on the matter, national heritage is viewed in this essay as a broad term that encompasses socioeconomic, as well as personal/individual identities. As a result, all personal and cultural identities are viewed as synonyms for the same definition, and words like community, group, and personal identification are synonymously used to describe cultural identity.

Cultural Identity in Monika Ali' s Works

Monica Ali has become an international celebrity because of her concern to raise the cry of women suffering alienation and sexual oppression in the patriarchal society. Her novels are critically examined to expose patriarchy's use of culture and traditional morality as powerful tools to control the female bodies. The representation of Bangladeshi woman is quite thought provoking as in theory she is considered as an image of love and honour, but in practical life she is subjugated, sexually molested, raped, and brutalized in the name of traditional morality and religion. The doctrine of patriarchal supremacy still exists in Bangladesh. The biological ideas about gender discrimination dominate all societies. Religious traditions in Bangladesh have been used by patriarchy to construct the bodies of women to be inferior, fragile, and passionate about uncontrolled sex. Women are psychologically and physically oppressed. They are treated as domestic cats subjugated by males because of their poverty, gender discrimination, illiteracy, and inheritance laws. In the postcolonial fiction, the real marginalized picture of women is depicted and there are many scenes of sexual violence in her novels. Women have to depend on men for financial security, love and sexual pleasures. They have to watch the moods and temperament of the male. In her novels, women are presented as victims of male violence.

Monica Ali in her *Brick Lane* (2007) depicts the diasporic experiences of the protagonists who leave Bangladesh for London. The novel is about a poor Bangladeshi girl Nazneen who is married to a 40 year-old man. Interestingly, when she arrived in London, Nazneen was trapped inside her apartment. Her eyesight is limited like her little window in her apartment that opens to the broken pavement of dead grass. Nazneen comes in contact with the outside world first, watching a tattoo lady on the other side of her apartment looking like a witch. The tattoo old white woman is soon to be named by Nazneen. She peers at the glass closely and stares with imagination and curiosity at the body of the mysterious woman.

The novel, *Brick Lane* was received well by the reviewers and critics and hailed as a classic first novel of Monica Ali depicting the traumatic experiences of the women of Bangladesh. The main focus of Monica Ali is on the theme of cultural collision of the migrants of Bangladesh who go abroad to earn dollars. The novel was born out of her experience from childhood onwards, and deals with "intergenerational and cultural conflicts"

(25). Concerning the fame she acquired after her debut, Monica Ali says:

Brick Lane was the creation of my personal experiences about the life and challenges of the migrants who often struggle to get a space in the alien land. The loss of identity is inevitable as the migrants of Bangladesh leave their homeland. (55)

Brick Lane has been judged to offer a “terrifically subtle portrait” of a Muslim marriage and provide “an insight into a religion that people often find confusing.” The current trend is to read *Brick Lane* as a “window” through which to view the Muslim “Other” and to examine the role of patriarchy and religion to subjugate women in the male dominated society. The novel depicts the poignant scenes of domestic violence and sexual oppression and marginalization of women. These issues are presented through the voice of Hasina and Nazneen’s flashbacks.

Brick Lane deals with the themes of identity confusion, gender inequality, and religious conflicts. It is also replete with sensational themes such as racism, sexuality, and patriarchy. The novel is about Nazneen who goes abroad to settle there with her husband and becomes the victim of cultural dislocation. She has to cope with the alien culture there and her identity gets fractured. The letters of Hasina keep her enlightened about the life in Bangladesh. Nazneen migrates to London with Chanu. But in London, she never enjoys life because she feels lonely and often recollects her golden days of youth spent in a village of Bangladesh. She also feels nostalgic about the separation from her beloved sister Hasina, who is still in Bangladesh. Nazneen defines it, “A woman alone in the city, without a husband, uncontrolled” (36), and that is precisely the role Hasina plays in most of the book, the role of the lone and hence uncontrolled lady.

The plot of *Brick Lane* reveals the theme of collision of cultures; Nazneen is caught in the web of clash of cultures. Her husband wants her daughters to speak Bangla at home, but his daughters are students of a Christian college. Chanu is a contradictory personality; Nazneen has to confront the oddities, whims and contradictions of her husband in London. He does not allow her to go out and all the time she is stuck in the kitchen. She is treated like a commodity by her orthodox husband. Monica Ali chooses Nazneen as her protagonist whose transformation and self-realization is of great interest. Nazneen is an example of a “subjugated Muslim woman.” At the end of the novel, she breaks all the barriers of traditional morality and expresses her freedom resisting against the oppressive cultural norms. Chanu fails in his long stay in London. He never feels settled and at the end of the novel he decides to go back to Bangladesh. His failure to assimilate in the alien culture brings anguish in his life. He fails because he is unable to cope with the cultural conflicts; remains rigid in his ideas till the end of his stay in London. On the contrary there is growth in Nazneen, who learns the art of confronting the colonial set up and adapts to the cultural changes.

Brick Lane depicts the scenes of violence and marginalization of women. These issues are presented through the letters of Hasina and Nazneen’s flashbacks. Nazneen is the main woman protagonist of the novel. At the very outset of the plot, Nazneen is locked into a foundational narrative, “the logic of the story of How You Were Left To Your Fate” (15), which tells when she was born and was refused to feed, no attempt was made to take her to hospital. Nazneen was “left to her fate” to live or die (15). She spends most of her time either in the kitchen or in cleaning rugs or dusting books. The communication

barrier blocks her growth. Chanu does not want her to go out in the streets because he believes in male hegemony. He simply asks her whenever she expresses her will to go out: “Why should you go out?”(45).

Brick Lane is populated with many women who play vital roles in the novel. Monica Ali has delineated the impact of corrosion of culture and portrayed them through suicides, arranged marriages, violence, polygamy, and prostitution. Women in this Bangladeshi enclave in London are not allowed to work, and are judged according to their clothes and behaviour. Their identity is formed by the sexism brought from Bangladesh that they have to handle. Suppression is another important aspect of the novel. Nazneen is born to her father’s disappointment: he wanted a boy (14). When Nazneen’s baby dies, her sister writes her a letter where she wishes Nazneen to have more sons (149). The differences between men and women are a cultural problem, and the letters of Hasina reveal the cultural differences: “I do my best but I am only a woman” (163). A woman is always the subject of controversy. People often invent false stories if a woman goes out. Women are always humiliated in the patriarchal society as in Bangladesh women are not given any liberty. In Bangladesh, women are not allowed to work outside and they are closely observed in dress, manner, and other matters of routine life. There are set norms for the ideal prescribed by Bangladeshi culture. Being lonely and desperate, Nazneen is compelled to build friendship with Razia, another Bangladeshi immigrant, and through an affair with immigrant Karim. The relationship symbolizes a clash of two cultures. Nazneen grows as she she learns the art of assimilation. She breaks her relationship with Karim at the end of the novel and takes a historical decision to live and fight with the cultural forces daringly and courageously. Nazneen has to encounter racism, sexism, and oppression.

The novel also focuses on the themes of colonization, alienation, cultural dislocation of the protagonists and their fractured identities. *Brick Lane* deals with the issues of cultural

conflicts that impact the individuality of the protagonists in the novel. Chanu an educated man marries Nazneen belonging to lower middle class society. She is not well educated but Chanu accepted her being older in age. Chanu is never comfortable in his job and Hassina often asks about his new job. He is a shifting guy encountering difficulties in alien land. Chanu fails in life and ironically Nazneen is the one who in the end succeeds despite her husband's strictures. Nazneen is successful in London, because she struggles to face the problems of cultural assimilation. She is ignorant of the social codes in England and feels dislocated because of the corrosion of cultures. Nazneen is a progressive girl, and she wants to learn English to survive in English society, but Chanu discourages her. Chanu himself stresses the high importance of education, but when Nazneen expresses her desire to learn English, his approach is contradictory. The novel is about women's issues within the community and reflects the postcolonial situation of Bangladesh. In *Brick Lane* cultural differences play havoc in the life of the protagonists since assimilation becomes difficult. The migrants lack in communication skills and they remain lonely and neglected in the society.

Nazneen has trouble finding her true self and her personality in the new country. Nazneen feels nostalgic all the time; her only company is TV and the old furniture, papers and books of Chanu. In England, Nazneen has to struggle to assimilate in her new country and culture. She has to learn to live in a completely new way. Nazneen has to encounter many cultural differences; she conceded to the choice of her father and married Chanu who took her to England. Problems of communication soon arise. Nazneen does not know a single word of English when she arrives; she learns only "Thank You" and "Sorry" after her long struggle. Chanu talks about philosophy and often refers to the great English poets in his routine conversation, but Nazneen does not understand him. She does not understand precisely what he does for a living. Chanu is a mighty creation of Monica Ali who becomes a victim of cultural collision and is forced to leave England in spite of his struggles to get assimilated into the English culture. He goes on shifting the jobs, because he is never comfortable in any of his jobs in England. He claims himself to be westernized; speaks English at home and speaks high of English culture and philosophy. Nazneen once overheard him in his telephonic conversation lashing at his wife. He observed that his young wife is "a commodity that he bought from the open market." She can produce many children since she has good hips" (14-15). He condemns his Bangladeshi people as "uneducated, illiterate, and close-minded without ambition" (20-21).

Chanu brings English manners and cultural values at home as he teaches his daughters the English manners and the religious practices. Chanu is a contradictory character; he says something else and believes something else. Chanu is caught in the dilemmas and uncertainties of life. He does not allow girls to learn English language and forbids Nazneen to take an English course. He struggles to maintain his Bangladeshi identity in London. Chanu is becoming a hybrid in England knowing well that his cultural beliefs and ideas are disappearing from his family. He lays stress on the eternal values of Islam. Nazneen notes that he never prays and believes that Bengalis were Hindus and Buddhists. The Moguls converted them into Muslims"(197). Chanu does not send his daughters to the conventional mosque school. Chanu's religion is "education" (260). Chanu is worried about his identity: "I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking of struggle to assimilate in the English culture" (113). Nazneen is surprised by the things she sees in her new country. She cannot understand why women care about such things as slimming their dogs, etc. In Bangladesh, such shallow

preoccupations did not exist, and being skinny could be a sign of poverty. However, in many ways Nazneen enjoys the fact that the English mind their own business.

Loneliness is also closely related to identity almost throughout the novel. Hermetaphysical loneliness contributes to insecurity and loss of self. She is trapped between two. To conclude, Monica Ali has vividly described the plight of Bangladeshi women trapped in the alien culture. Nazneen and Chanu desperately struggle to assimilate in the alien culture, but the forces of cultural collision are so powerful that bulldozed the identity of Chanu. He experiences acute frustration and goes back to Bangladesh. However, Nazneen confronts the cultural reality and successfully adapts to the imperial culture to survive in the colonized society. This cultural antagonism is transmitted to the second generation as the daughters of Nazneen come under the impact of British culture and learn the art of surviving in the alien land. They become hybrid as they carry with them the traditional culture of Bangladesh and imbibe the values of British life as well. Monica Ali has realistically dramatized the scenes of cultural collision in this novel.

cultures, she feels nostalgic about the scenes and sights in Bangladesh, and she also tries to settle in London. Nazneen faces a new dilemma; she has to assimilate in her new country and culture. She is confronted with the dilemma to live in an alien land and to adjust with Chanu who is twice of her age. In her new apartment Nazneen feels lonely and restless. The image of saree with so many layers depicts the inner sufferings. Nazneen goes with her friend Razia to buy her clothes in the market. Nazneen unravels the secrets of her life to her new friend Karim. Like the folds of sari, she unfolds the inner pent up feelings of her life. For the first time, she discloses her inner secrets to her friend. This scene in the novel symbolizes her economic freedom and independence.

In *Brick Lane*, all women are trapped in the diasporic mesh. Nazneen and Mrs. Islam are two important women who live in an alien land with fractured identity. Both are victims of cultural collision. In the last section of the novel, Monica Ali describes the various stages of awareness of Nazneen. The scene of roundabout is significant, because it further depicts the inner world of Nazneen who is crushed by the burden of cultural collision in the novel. Nazneen looks at the roundabout which symbolizes her turbulent state of mind. The roundabout “symbolized the riddles of life. She was in a situation where she couldn’t get freedom and was bound to go round and round like roundabout” (278). The symbol of the roundabout is very effective in depicting the inner traumatic world of Nazneen, Hasina and other women in the novel. Nazneen and many other women in *Brick Lane* face hindrances when it comes to escape. They have to remain inside their cage; they are not given any chance to break away from their lives. Nazneen has a dream about being trapped as well. She feels that she is caught in an alley and she “has no chance to fly away” (431). All women in the novel are locked up in a patriarchal mess; they have to whirl around like the roundabout of life.

Brick Lane is a heart rending tale of colonized fallen women who suffer cultural dislocation, displacement and fractured identities. Domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and mental torture are common occurrences in the world of *Brick Lane*. Monica Ali describes the experiences of women in a patriarchal setup with the accompanying violent behaviour, discriminations and inequalities. This paper examines these in the light of corrosion of self and cultural antagonism. Women experience violence as

wives and citizens and acceptance of brutality is a cultural phenomenon which promotes their inferior position and denies them any right. It is quite ironical to note that women suffer physical and psychological consequences and put up with pain and terror silently.

Conclusion

The themes of cultural consciousness and diaspora have long been subjects of fascination and exploration in literature. They provide a window into the intricate web of human experiences, where the sense of belonging, identity, and displacement intersect. In this study, we have delved deeply into the works of two prominent authors, Monica Ali and Rohinton Mistry, to unravel the layers of cultural consciousness and diaspora within their novels. Through a comparative analysis of their respective works, we have gained valuable insights into how these authors portray the complex interplay of identity, culture, and displacement. Ali and Mistry, both master storytellers, offer rich narrative and thematic depth that serve as a lens through which we can understand and appreciate the experiences of diasporic communities. In this reflection, we will further explore the implications of our findings and delve into the nuanced ways these authors illuminate the profound impact of cultural consciousness and diaspora on the lives of their characters.

Cultural consciousness, at its core, is the awareness and recognition of one's cultural heritage, values, and identity. It is the foundational element upon which diaspora rests, as individuals who find themselves living outside their homeland often grapple with questions of belonging and cultural preservation. Monica Ali and Rohinton Mistry, in their novels, deftly navigate these intricate terrains of cultural consciousness and diaspora, shedding light on the myriad ways in which characters negotiate their sense of self and belonging in the face of displacement.

Monica Ali's "Brick Lane" takes us into the world of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman who moves to London for an arranged marriage. As Nazneen adapts to her new life in a foreign land, Ali skillfully depicts the evolution of her cultural consciousness. At the outset, Nazneen is portrayed as passive and submissive, following traditions and expectations set by her community and husband. However, as the narrative unfolds, we witness her gradual awakening to her own agency and identity. This transformation is emblematic of the complex journey many immigrants experience as they balance the preservation of their cultural heritage with the need for personal growth and self-expression.

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