



Diaspora, Identity, and Displacement in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

Aim: *This Paper aims to explore Brick Lane as a novel of displacement. The novel covers a variety of themes, including multiculturalism, migration and economic inequality, feminism and gender inequality, and loneliness. It will focus on displacement as it intends to comprehend and show how characters are displaced from their homeland and assimilate different identities in the foreign land.*

Methodology and Approach: *This paper will analyze and explain different responses when dealing with the feeling of nostalgia and alienation from their homeland. We follow the critical and explorative approach in the paper.*

Outcome: *Monica Ali, Bangladeshi-born British writer has presented the condition of living and working of Asian minorities in Britain, as well as their culture in the alien land.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *In addition, the diversity in loss of their own culture. It will analyze the first and second generations, as well as the question of discrimination and racial prejudices, and explore how these issues are related to the themes of the assimilation of cultures.*

Keywords: *Displacement, Alienation, Nostalgia, Multiculturalism, Migration*

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The term that refers to the sense of alienation, sensation of nostalgia and displacement about immigrants is known as Diaspora. Originally it is an allusion to the dispersion of Jews outside Israel. It is a kind of rootlessness. They severed from their homeland. The Jews were forced to leave Egypt to escape servitude. The result of leaving their homeland was indeed their identity loss as they did not know who they are anymore. Since then the term diaspora is related to the dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland. There are many definitions and concepts explaining the term diaspora. Professor James Clifford uses the expression “dwellings-in-displacement” (Clifford, 310). As dwelling is an essential aspect of defining diaspora, the implication of home and homemaking is crucial in diasporic space.

All the mentioned features are reflected in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*. It also shows the theme of rootlessness which is connected to diasporic themes, which will be later discussed. Even though the term ‘Diaspora’ has gone through

several changes in its meaning, it preserves certain features such as rootlessness, homelessness, alienation, and love for the mother country. In simple terms when people leave their homes they are affected by loneliness and they are likely to be unpleasantly surprised by the absence of the feeling of being at a real home. Diasporic communities face problems such as discrimination, alienation, and identity crises.

Feeling of displacement, loneliness, a sense of alienation from society and longing a part of diaspora literature. Identity is another common theme of diasporic literature where in many cases the search for self-identity is depicted as distressing, painful, and only rarely rewarding.

Some authors write semi-autobiographical novels, looking into their pasts with the intention of either discovering or re-examining their affinities and motivations. Others employ fictional characters and situations to challenge traditional norms, testing, trying, and occasionally reinforcing notions of race and culture. Ali's origin is highly significant in the context of her writing. Being both British and Bangladeshi she is a first-generation diasporic writer.

The insight into her personal life shows that she cannot be considered to be part of one world, West or East. She must be regarded as a part of both worlds. Monica Ali was born in Pakistan in 1967 to an English mother and a Bengali father. Her parents met in northern England where her mother was born and brought up. Despite the protest of their families, they decided to move and live in Dhaka. It was her mother who first experienced Ali's family's utter cultural and social dislocation being moved to Bangladesh, knowing little of the culture and religion, and speaking not a word of the language. In her essay in *The Washington Post* on "how to Bangladesh did not exist until 1971. She creates her fictional worlds" Ali confesses that stories she used to hear from her mother inspired her when creating the protagonist of *Brick Lane*, Nazneen. She admits "She came to me, I think, through my mother."

The family settled in northwest England, where Monica's grandparents lived, but their new home was not as they dreamed it. First, it was very difficult for her father, being Asian, to find a job. Next, Ali's grandparents were not very welcoming towards them as they were upset about having their daughter married to a Bengali husband. However, they were even less happy to see her return from Dhaka with two small kids. Furthermore, due to arising anti-Asian sentiment within British society, they all experienced racism. Ali writes "I had to fight: racism, ignorance, poverty, all of that – I don't want you to go through it." (391) Ali mentioned in the Evening Standard. She recounts her childhood, which indeed affected her: Worrying about belonging, how to fit in, is part of childhood, but it was heightened for me, I think that Knowing how to behave one moment if I was going to my father's Bengali friends, and how to behave in a completely different context and situation. I was always an outsider, always standing outside, observing and trying to figure things out. Ali's parents considered their stay in England a temporary one. Ali writes

It would be possible to tuck all your hundred pens and pencils under those rolls and keep them safe and tight. You could stuff a book or two up there as well. If your spindle legs could take the weight. 'What's more, she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that. The only complaint I could make is she can't put my files in order, because she has no English. I don't complain though.

As I say, a girl from the village: totally unspoilt. (31)

They intended to return to Bangladesh when the situation in their home country becomes more secure. However, as the children settled into school, they eventually stopped speaking Bengali, and later on, they even stopped understanding. Monica Ali recalls in the article in The Guardian "The new status quo was accepted. There was no plan, after that, to "go home"... And home because it could never be reached, became mythical: Tagore's golden Bengal, a

teasing counterpoint to our drab northern mill town lives. ” (Ali). These biographical elements can be identified in *Brick Lane* without difficulty. She went to the Bolton school and graduated from Oxford University. Later she worked in marketing and design, married a management consultant Simon Torrance and had two children. Her debut novel *Brick Lane* catapulted her into fame in 2003, even before it was officially published. She was selected as one of the Best of Young British Novelists by Granta magazine based on *Brick Lane*. When published, It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and named one of the New York Times' best books of 2003. It has been translated into more than twenty languages and was turned into a film in 2007.

Her second novel, *Alentejo Blue*, set in Portugal, was published in 2006. Her third novel, *In the Kitchen*, can be categorized in the subgenre of crime fiction but as the story advances, it moves beyond crime fiction to examine present-day multiethnic globalized British society. Her latest novel, *Untold Story*, is a tale about Princess Diana, who fakes her death and starts her new life in a small town in America. It was published in 2011. Her fifth novel, *Love Marriage*(2022) is a riveting portrait of a seemingly perfect engagement's unraveling. It is a multicultural family drama. Even though Ali herself refuses categorization, thanks to her writings she can be undeniably listed as a postcolonial writer. It is through her books that the minor communities in England gained publicity as many were interested in her novel. The book, *Brick Lane*, brings insight both into immigrant life in England in comparison to life in Bangladesh. Ali writes

He looked at Shahana and raised his eyebrows as if to say That woman, how she always spoils our fun. Shahana allowed him a smile and Chanu was very pleased. 'I don't know, Shahana. Sometimes I look back and am shocked. Every day of my life I have prepared for success, worked for it, waited for it, and you

don't notice how the days pass until nearly a lifetime has finished. Then it hits you – the thing you have been waiting for has already gone by. And it was going in the other direction. (391)

The novel is written from the point of view of Nazneen a Bangladeshi girl who is at the age of 18 beginning a new life in England as she has been married off to twenty years older man living in London. Her husband Chanu is described as a man full of plans, without the ability to finish anything he starts, with a face like a frog and great knowledge of Bangladesh history. Nazneen being taught since her birth that her life is entirely in the hands of fate wholly accepts the arrangements her father has made. In her new situation, she becomes entirely reliant on her husband in terms of negotiating her limited contact with the English-speaking world.

The marriage, however, seems to be problematic as days pass when frustrations tend to creep in. Nazneen feels that Chanu is so into the traditions that he has been strictly following even in the new environment. She is disturbed by the lack of movement ability that has been brought about by him. He is not willing to let her travel by herself and is so precise with his choice. As the couple is met by the birth of their first son Raqib, Chanu tends to make decisions about leaving the new home and returning to their home country. He is stressed by the conditions prevailing in the area and gets the fear of losing his child to the bad habits practiced by the young generation and decides that returning home might save the situation. However, the decrease of Raqib brings a healing presence in their relationship. Their marriage challenges seem to escalate especially after the birth of two more children who are girls and that returns the previous thought of Chanu leaving the country. Ali writes

It gave her some satisfaction. For years she had felt she must not relax. If she relaxed, things would fall apart. Only the constant

vigilance and planning, the low-level, unremarked and unrewarded activity of a woman, kept the household from crumbling. (401)

The main reasons for his decision are to protect his daughters from the environment where the domination of drugs is taking place as well as the mistreatment of the Muslims. Hasina, who is brought forth as Nazneen's sister, discovers that life is not as positive as she imagined after rebelling against her family and running away with her lover to Dhaka.

The protagonist learns from letters that her sister in her effort to survive the conditions and have an independent life has been rooted in prostitution. Chanu's new position as a driver helps Nazneen to work and bring in extra money which is supposed to help him to facilitate his shifting agenda. As she performs her sewing skills as a job, she soon meets with Karim who is a supplier of sewing materials, and with time, the two get engaged in a romantic affair. Mrs. Islam has employed thugs who are her sons to pressure the couple into giving back the money which was borrowed by Chanu to control the financial situation in his marriage. Therefore, there are two situations; a financial crisis and at the same time, the new affair that has been made by Nazneen. She is later faced with a mental breakdown which is the condition that is developed by the overwhelming situations that include the debt payment that they are expected to deliver as well as the messy affair in which she has engaged.

There is the situation of her firstborn death which frequently returns to her mind and all the problems overwhelm her hence her condition. However, there is the captivating ending of the book where Chanu achieves his intention to leave the country thus leaving the children under the watch of Nazneen who has just come from a mental condition. She gets back to her sewing business and the ending shows that she has achieved a dramatic transformation that in the novel symbolized by fulfilling her dream of participating in the skating sport.

Cultural diversity can be defined as the variety of cultures that might be present in certain regions of the world or are distributed across the globe. London provides a good example of cultural diversity as there is the presence of different people from different cultures and backgrounds. Cultural diversity is supposed to be held by every person including those who are not part of society. Culture is defined as the way of living and therefore, it varies from different societies and practices. Our culture has a significant impact on our personality. It affects our habits, morals, thinking, living patterns, and social interactions. It also becomes a part of our life and personal identity. When a person moves away from his culture to another one it is likely to cause him trauma. While some people find it easy to deal with this cultural shock, others suffer from yearning for their cultural roots. They feel torn between the cultural identity of their home country and the cultural identity of the new place. Ali writes:

An idea of himself that he found in her. The waitress stood by the counter. In her right hand she held a pen. Between her thumb and forefinger, she rolled the pen round and round. She spoke to a customer. The pen kept rolling. How had she made him? She did not know. She had patched him together, working in the dark. She had made a quilt out of pieces of silk, scraps of velvet, and now that she held it up to the light the stitches showed up large and crude, and they cut across everything. (560)

The novel *Brick Lane* persuasively portrays the immigrant's uneasiness, their problems, and the trauma they undergo due to cultural clashes. The Bangladeshi community is torn between nostalgic craving for home and the yearning for respect, recognition, and inclusion in British culture. Chanu is a classic example of an immigrant experiencing the dilemma of being entrapped between two worlds. Catriona Mackenzie summarizes his dilemma in the following words:

Nankeen's husband, Chanu, is similarly caught. The more his desire for recognition is frustrated the more he feels alienated both from the English culture from which he once hoped to gain respect and from the East London Bangladeshi community, which is riven with internal dissension, intergenerational conflict and hostility towards the dominant culture. (103)

He has a feeling of being an outsider, a sensation of not being quite part of the culture. Chanu is convinced that traditions are unchangeable and one should stick to them at any cost. What is more, nothing could convince him that traditions and culture can be affected by some factors in the present, or can be modified over some time. Examples of his rigidity as long as traditions are concerned are abundant in the novel. For instance, it seems that Chanu got married only to have a wife who would keep the house and give birth. He describes her as a 'good worker' and an 'unspoiled girl. Ali writes that "hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children" (Ali 23). When Nazneen starts working for money, he seems to be proud of her and says, "when I married her, I said: she is a good worker..All the clever-clever girls are not worth one hair on her head" (Ali 207).

He is again praising this 'good worker' in Nazneen and he is repeating the same attitude he expressed a few years ago when she first came to London. These descriptions denote patriarchal thoughts that do not change for Chanu over time. He is also full of pride in his identification as a member of ethnic and religious groups. This shows that he strives to hold on to his past. Chanu's frustration and disillusionment with England come to the surface when he states: When I came I was a young man. I had ambitions and big dreams. When I got off the plane, I had my degree certificate in my suitcase. I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me. I was going to join the civil service and become Private Secretary to the Prime Minister. That was my plan. And I found things were a bit different. Stuart

Hall's comment on identity also portrays the condition of diasporic people. When a diasporic community moves away from their home country they tend to carry their home culture with them. The novel is represented by Razia's husband who sends the majority of the money back home to Bangladesh and he provides very little for his family. His daughter Shefali at one point even asks him, "Abba, how many bricks did you earn today?" (Ali 98)

Dr. Azad, on the other hand, represents the small number of immigrants from Bangladesh who have managed to secure a decent job and escaped poverty in the immigrant land. On the occasion of their unexpected and fairly awkward visit of Mr. And Mrs., Azad Chanu reveals his observation on the plight of those who have undergone migration. "This is the tragedy of our lives. To be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy" (Ali 112). He also laments that "behind every story of immigrant success there lies a deeper tragedy" (Ali 113).

Being requested by Mrs. Azad, who assimilated entirely within the western culture, to clarify this tragedy? Chanu, in an emotional and slightly melodramatic way, asserts: I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family. Mrs. Azad, in contrast, reasons that the idea of "tragedy" as suggested by Chanu is not correct. Listen, when I'm in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work. I work with white girls and I'm just one of them. If I want to come home and eat curry, that's my business. Some women spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English.' She looked at Nazneen who focused on Raqib. They go around

covered from head to toe, in their little walking prisons, and when someone calls to them in the street they are upset.

Society is racist. Society is all wrong. Everything should change for them. They don't have to change one thing. She said, stabbing the air, 'is the tragedy.' What Mrs. Azad says is that the real tragedy lies in a reality where people don't change themselves but want everything to change for them. Her speech also explains how free Mrs. Azad thinks she is because she has released herself from traditional cultural beliefs. Her attitudes are disturbing and inapprehensible to Chanu and Nazneen, but greatly acceptable to the western reader. She is fully educated, speaks English fluently, does not wear the sari, and goes to work. Moreover, she calls her people racist who are constantly complaining but unable to assimilate according to context. She is the only character representing resistance to 'their culture'. On the other hand,

Some Bangladeshi characters have prejudices against people of different origins and they resist other cultures to keep their national identity. Mrs. Islam represents quite opposite extreme of Mrs. Azad. She reveals to Razia her point of view about mingling with people of other nationalities: Mixing with all sorts: Turkish, English, Jewish. All sorts. I am not old fashioned,' said Mrs. Islam. 'I don't wear a burka. I keep purdah in my mind, which is the most important thing. Plus I have cardigans and anoraks and a scarf for my head. But if you mix with all these people, even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs. That's how it is. Even though minority groups stay in the settlement country, they keep their links of kinship, culture, and religion with their homeland. For Bangladeshis, having Mrs. Islam as an example, mingling with other nationalities means that they have to abandon their own culture and embrace others. Another issue that hinders the immigrants' integration process is their socioeconomic situation. As Catherine Pessa-Miquel mentions, "the famous sights of Central London remain invisible to many Londoners either because they

never go near them, or because they pass them every day, but hardly ever notice their presence” (84)

The immigrant families who work hard to earn their living do not even know the city they live in. Chanu, “thirty or so years after he arrived in London, decided that it was time to see the sights ” (Ali 289). As he reveals “all I saw was the Houses of Parliament. And that was in 1979” (Ali 289). The immigrants, to save money, hardly ever leave the place they live in. Chanu says “I’ve spent more than half my life here, but I hardly left these few streets” (Ali 291). Ali also suggests here that Chanu has not been successful in being open-minded and interested in his new country. When he takes his family on the trip to see places around London, it transpires that this sightseeing trip is the first holiday in decades.

This scene is crucial, as it indicates that the immigrants in London could achieve a much better life if they let the culture of the new country and its people approach them. In addition, Ali indicates that it is achievable and beneficial for immigrants to maintain their own identity and remain loyal to their cultural background, while at the same time, they can learn to know their new country and its culture. Chanu also repeatedly mentions that the West continuously looks at them with disdain and regards the immigrant as lower. He utters that All these people here who look down on us as peasants know nothing of history...in the sixteenth century; Bengal was called the Paradise of Nations. These are our roots. Do they teach these things in the school here? Does Shahana know about the Paradise of Nations? All she knows about is flood and famine. The whole bloody country is just a bloody basket case to her. This extract not only shows that Chanu is unhappy and unsatisfied with the education system as according to him the British present bad images of Bangladesh but most importantly he expresses that the roots of his desire to return to Bangladesh are grounded in his craving to protect his children and give them a sense of roots and connection to the culture

they came from. Chanu repeatedly attempts to force his daughters to practice what he wants.

This all happens for the sake of saving their family roots and having the identity that he wishes them to have. He believes that London is an unsuitable place for Shanana and Bibi to grow up. His reflection on British cultural patterns is the following: It's so ingrained in the fabric of society. Back home, if you drink you risk being an outcast. In London, if you don't drink you risk the same thing. That's when it becomes dangerous, and when they start so young they can easily end up an alcoholic. In contrast to Chanu, there is Razia who is thankful for living in an advanced and affluent country where her family can live a decent life, where she can have a satisfactory job, and where health care and education are free. She fully realizes that she would not be able to live in Bangladesh with the same benefits. She is a woman of strong character. Her first move is that learn English. Then she stops wearing a sari and cuts her hair short. Razia identifies with English culture, and she is pleased to be given a British passport. Another contrasting character to Chanu is Mrs. Azad who is fully aware of the fact that they are living in Western society and she enjoys acting like Westerners. Therefore Chanu, Mrs. Azad, Razia, and Mrs. Islam represent different responses to the diaspora. Razia is a woman of strong character. Her first step is learning English, then she cuts her hair short and stops wearing a sari. She wears men's clothes and swears, and her gestures increasingly become man-like.

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