



Female Resistance in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Aim: The paper explores the plight of women, the quest for self-actualization, and identity assertion concerning female resistance in multicultural metropolitan societies. Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* and Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* are most often analyzed from the vantage points of post-colonialism. *Brick Lane* deals primarily with the plight of the Bangladeshi immigrant community in London whereas *A Golden Age* deals with the characters that live in Bangladesh during the war of liberation.

Methodology and Approach: The paper basically discusses the female resistance in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*. The paper is all about a comparative study of the same.

Outcome: The present paper is based on Anam's *A Golden Age* and Ali's *Brick Lane* which highlights female resistance in a male-dominated society. It also

analyses the challenges of married women as social beings. They endured, before marriage and in wedlock. The present paper aims to prove that female resistance against power groups is actually at the forefront of Ali's novel and Anam's novel and the female characters in *Brick Lane* and *A Golden Age* stand for female resistance on the abyss between theoretical gender equality and practical real-life sexist attitude of patriarchal society and inequality in the society

Conclusion and Suggestion: Through the women characters in the novel, Anam and Ali depict feminine strives, sexual violence, and traumatic experiences women endure. Anam's and Ali's writings have impressive characters that raise the voice of voiceless women of Bangladesh as well as all women folk.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Female resistance against subjugation, feminism, emancipation

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Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* is most often analyzed from the vantage point of post-colonialism which deals primarily with the plight of the Bangladeshi immigrant community in London, *Brick Lane* is the story of Nazneen, a young woman of Bangladeshi origin, who comes to England by way of her arranged marriage to Chanu, a man significantly older than her. Nazneen expresses her view about Chanu in these words she is happy that she feels independent "That's how they think. They are not modern. Not like me." 'It was lucky for me' – her heart swelled as she spoke – "that my father chose an educated man" (567).

Brought up in the image of the submissive, obedient Bengali wife, Nazneen soon finds herself attracted to Western freedoms, and even enters a passionate physical relationship with the young Islamist radical Karim. In the end, Nazneen rejects both Chanu and Karim. Nazneen explains her thought in these words:

Do not despair of the mercy of God, for Allah forgives all sins. He nodded. He seemed to want her to join in. 'Is that what it is?' he said. 'The sin of it?' She touched his hand for the last time. 'Oh Karim, that we have already done. But always there was a problem between us. How can I explain? I wasn't me, and you weren't you. From the very beginning to the very end, we didn't see things. What we did – we made each other up (382).

She finds her voice and self-determination in her relationship with her two daughters and her female friends. It is a kind of indirect resistance. Tahmima Anam's debut novel *A Golden Age*, tells us the story of a young Muslim widow, Rehana Haque who belongs to an aristocratic family in Calcutta. However, due to some economic failures, her family loses its wealth. Rehana enters into an arranged marriage with a businessman from Dhaka. She is living happily with her husband Iqbal and two children—Maya and Sohail. But soon this happiness turns into an extensive phase of misfortunes and grief. Iqbal dies due to sudden cardiac arrest leaving the responsibility of two kids on Rehana. He does not leave any riches or wealth on which the family can sustain after losing their only breadwinner

The story of Nazneen and Rehana is similar, and can much easier be read as the plight of women in their quest for self-determination and identity than as a novel about cultural clashes in the multicultural metropolis because both are left helpless in this cruel society. The postcolonial and feminist concerns. One might easily argue that feminism is actually at the forefront of Ali's novel, and the

feminine characters in *Brick Lane* and *An Golden Age* stand for a female resistance between theoretical gender equality and real-life sexism.

In Anam's *A Golden Age*, Soon after the death of Iqbal, his rich brother, Faiz, files a court case for the custody of the children. Rehana has no money to fight the case or bribe the judge to win the guardianship of Maya and Sohail. Faiz wins the case and temporary custody of the children is given to him. He takes away Rehana's children to Lahore and leaves her behind. Rehana struggles to attain financial stability and arrange optimum funds to build a new house that can be used as a rented property to get a regular income. Some opportunists try to take advantage of her innocence and circumstances but she fights through every odd situation like a true warrior. Rehana can get back her children to Dhaka after building a new house, Shona, and starts earning money by renting it out to the Sengupta.

Nazneen, a Bangladeshi girl who comes to London at the age of eighteen as a result of an arranged marriage, her beautiful and impetuous sister Hasina, their mysterious mother referred to as Amma, their aunt Mumtaz, Nazneen's neighbors in London (Razia, Mrs. Islam, Jorina, Hanufa, Nazma, Sorupa), her daughters Shahana and Bibi – and even seemingly minor characters who briefly appear in the novel, but have an enormous impact on the overall symbolism and significance of the text (e.g. the tattooed lady, the woman who commits suicide by jumping from a building, the sex worker Shenaz) are also of the female gender.

Rehana becomes emotionally weak and vulnerable to the thought of losing her children again. After fighting desperately for her children, another force that threatens her is the growing violence between East and West Pakistan. Maya and Sohail are influenced by revolutionary ideas and explicitly support the Bengali uprising against the biased Pakistani government. The political upheavals in the country silently hamper the personal life of Rehana and her children. Sohail leaves his gentle demeanor and an inherent love for Urdu poetry behind and

completely associates himself with the guerrilla operations. Maya adorns the radical fervor and gives away all her colored clothes. She wears white saris and participates in student rallies, marches, and meetings against the discriminatory attitude of the government toward the Bengali people.

Men appear frugally and hastily in Brick Lane, disappearing as swiftly as they appeared and leaving no considerable traces behind in the same way Iqbal dies and Rehana becomes helpless. Chanu and Karim both leave London. Razia's husband is killed in an accident-even Nazneen's baby boy Raqib dies unexpectedly at the frail age of five months. Men always leave, so women would do better not to place their existence in their hands, is what the novel seems to suggest. Ali writes:

That's how the women in my village got themselves a new well. If you think you are powerless, then you are. Everything is within you, where God put it. If your husband does not do what is required, think what you yourself have left undone." (83)

Rehana becomes helpless but She also has a consistent fear of losing her children due to their dedication toward Bengali liberation. She also tries to unite herself with the Bengali identity by providing a helping hand to the revolutionaries, refugees, and guerrilla operations. The call for independence lights a spirit of hope in the Bengali people but also increases the fear of violence against them by the military. To suppress the revolutionary activities, the Pakistani army enters the city with huge tanks and targets the university campus. They kill innocent people on the streets and impose curfews in the cities. The violence against the Bengali people does not end rather "the attack on Dhaka was only the beginning" (84). The military targets "one district after another, leaving behind a trail of burning villages" (84) and wailing families.

Nazneen is all alone in London. No one is there to help her because both left her. She came to know the psyche of males. This is masterfully reflected by

Amma's words: "Treat it like a baby, but it will fly away. Waste your love on a bird, but it cannot love you back. It will fly away" (217). Amma refers to the bird her sister Mumtaz has found and is taking care of, but actually, she is talking about men, love, and her unhappy marriage to her husband who has another wife he visits regularly.

Rehana finds a friend in Major and nurses him with care and affection. For Rehana, Major is an embodiment of Bangladesh and she builds a bond of love and affection with him and shares her deep dark secrets with him. Soon, Rehana leaves Dhaka for her safety and joins Maya in Calcutta. She visits the refugee camps at Salt Lake and volunteers to help people there. She comes across many women who have lost their psychological balance due to the horrific crimes committed against them. At the camp, she runs into Mrs. Sengupta – her tenant from Shona who is in a terrible state and a testament to the brutal violence that she had endured. After some time, Rehana returns to Dhaka with Maya and Sohail at a time when the situation is much worse. Sohail plans guerrilla attacks on the Pakistani army. Soon, the army finds out about Sohail and looks for him everywhere. To save the revolution, Major steps in and tells the army that he is Sohail and faces the consequences. Over time, with assistance from the Indian armed forces, the liberation movement gathers steam and Bangladesh breathes freedom. While Rehana is relieved that the war spared her children, she is also engulfed in grief thinking about the torture, rapes, and genocides in Bangladesh. Anam gives her characters an active spark to become participants in the struggle, not mere interpreters. Anam tries to depict her protagonist, Mrs. Rehana Haque as an archetype of a powerful woman who fights all odds in her life to save her children from inconvenience and trouble. Besides being a part of the conventional society, Rehana carries an image of a 'New Woman' in war narratives. After the sudden loss of her husband, Rehana battles the preconceived notions of society

where a widow has no identity without her husband. In patriarchal societies, widowhood is considered painful, inauspicious, and humiliating for a woman.

Rehana endures humiliation, taunts, indifference, and misbehavior even at the hands of her relatives. She resisted patriarchal norms. She suffers psychological abuse at the hands of society. She loses her identity and respect due to the death of her husband. In fact, “Even in modern family setup widowhood, and its accompanying miserable existence is considered as atonement for some sin committed earlier. That is why often a widow’s life is made disconsolate by her in-laws... She is meted out harsh treatment and often held responsible for her husband’s death” (Reddy 28). However, her sufferings don’t end here. She fights a legal battle against her brother-in-law who wants custody of her children. The judiciary and legal courts find Rehana incapable of raising her children and award custody to her brother-in-law. Male supremacy has been prevalent throughout history. The story is in manner that the microcosm of Rehana’s family depicts the macrocosm of the tumultuous times of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Nazneen is initially also trapped in this model, and the more she becomes conscious of it and tries to escape it, the more her self-inflicted feelings of guilt hold her back. There are passages of extraordinary descriptive, narrative and symbolic force in the novel, describing Nazneen’s hallucinations brought about by her difficulty in letting go of her patriarchal upbringing. As soon as she moved, the smooth wood of the choki turned to glue and stuck to her thighs. She tried to free herself but sticky tendrils lashed around her legs. Thick fronds whipped around her stomach and arms, warm and wet as mucus and tough as vines.

In the novel, Rehana’s physical appearance has been shown as similar to or symbolic of the situation in Bangladesh. At thirty-eight, Rehana’s body had finally caught up with history. People who did not know used to assume she was a student, or that she was unmarried because she didn’t wear a wedding ring or a single piece of gold jewelry, but no longer. She had gained a little weight, and she

enjoyed the curve of her belly, the slight effort of movement, an awareness of breath and bone. Her new, comfortable shape came with new imperfections: the bowed line between nose and chin, the slight shadow above her lip, and the thickening of her waist and ankles. All fortunate developments of Rehana, as they signified the battle-weary body of a woman who has passed years in the efforts to raise her children.

Her brief encounter with Major, helps her embrace her country wholeheartedly. She supports her kids through their activities despite being worried about their safety. In the latter part of the story, when Rehana goes to Calcutta and starts helping people at relief camps, she witnesses the horror that women are living through due to the atrocities committed on them during the revolution. She helps them get through the horror and eventually returns to Bangladesh. Anam has also done a good job describing Muslim women who despite being confined to the premises of their homes found ways to connect with the larger issues of society. Some even became active participants in the struggle for freedom. She beautifully describes how political agendas disrupt personal lives blurring the line between political and personal issues.

In the face of patriarchy and oppression, *Brick Lane* offers various means of coping and resistance which is rebellion and defiance towards social and moral norms, Mrs. Islam's, which is copying and emulating patriarchy, and Nazneen's and Razia's, which are based on spiritual growth, finding one's voice, identity and individuality, and realizing that female spiritual communion is superior to heterosexual relationships in Nazneen's case).

Rehana, who never thought about being a part of Bangladesh's freedom struggle, eventually ended up helping revolutionaries and battered women in relief camps. Rehana's character is an embodiment of the silent suffering that women go through in a patriarchal society. Talking about strong women, Maya's character cannot be ignored. Maya is educated, free-willed, and liberal in her

thoughts and actions. She believes in making the world a better place by each one contributing towards it. Maya dreams of a free Bangladesh. She is devastated when her friend Sharmeen is reported missing. The political upheavals and instability finally enter the microcosm of Rehana's family. However, being a strong woman, Maya turns this loss into motivation. When the guerrilla activities from 'Shona' commences, Maya starts helping the revolutionaries write press releases. Eventually, when Maya finds out that Sharmeen was brutally raped, became pregnant, and lost her life at the cantonment hospital, she becomes furious. She decides to leave Dhaka and go to Calcutta since she cannot imagine forgiving the people who had killed her dear friend.

Calcutta seems like a more liberal place to work and she decides to join a magazine writing press statements. She wants to tell the world about the atrocities committed by the Pakistani army in Bangladesh, particularly women. She also visits the relief camps at Salt Lake to help people in distress. When the situation worsens in Dhaka, Rehana comes to visit her in Calcutta. Together, they help many distressed women in relief camps before returning to Bangladesh. During the Liberation War, Pakistani soldiers rape and kill thousands of women. These crimes were causing major public outrage but that didn't stop the army from committing crimes against women. The soldiers would abduct women at night and drag them to army camps where they were raped for days and months. During this time, many women got pregnant and even lost their lives. Once Bangladesh got its independence, there was a huge population of rape survivors in the country. Six days after the end of the war, the new Bangladeshi government publicly designated any.

At the end of the novel, when Nazneen's husband Chanu and her lover Karim have both fled to Bangladesh (one because he has failed to become successful in England, and the other one to join an extremist Islamic group), and Razia's husband has been killed in an accident (he was crushed by the frozen

carcasses of seventeen cows falling on him in the slaughterhouse he works for), the two women find themselves faced with the necessity of taking their lives into their own hands. Ali writes:

Sometimes she switched on the television and flicked through the channels, looking for ice e-skating. For a whole week it was on every afternoon while Nazneen sat cross-legged on the floor. While she sat, she was no longer a collection of the hopes, random thoughts, petty anxieties and selfish wants that made her, but was whole and pure. The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white light, glory. But when it ended and she switched off the television, the old Nazneen returned. For a while it was a worse Nazneen than before because she hated the socks as she rubbed them with soap (53).

The ridiculous death of Razia's husband (who in his own home was a frequent verbal and physical abuser) is not the only episode of this sort presented in the novel. Most of the time men are presented as ridiculous by Ali: from Chanu's perpetually inflated stomach (and ego) to the holes in Karim's socks, the novel's imagery of men seems to suggest that women imagine manhood much more than they experience it. When men are not violent, aggressive, dangerous, or downright murderous, they can only be ridiculous, is the novel's ultimate implication. What remains is the realization that in most heterosexual relationships, partners "make each other up," as Nazneen accurately voices it at the end of the novel: "She touched his hand for the last time. 'Oh, Karim (...) always there was a problem between us. How can I explain? I wasn't me, and you weren't you. From the very beginning to the very end, we didn't see things. What we did—we made each other up" (455). But while Karim fails to realize this, Nazneen feels the full blow of her realization: men as desirable and respectable life partners can only exist within the female imagination.

The novel's final scene of perfect female communion between the two middle-aged women and the two young girls, separated by generation gaps and conflictual cultural and religious identities, but held together by their common womanhood, speaks for the ultimate conviction that for a woman to achieve peace of mind and self-determination, she needs to exist in an all-female community, away from men. All the tragedies and misfortunes of women in Brick Lane are inevitably tied to men: Amma's suicide, the disappearance of Abba's second wife, Mumtaz's difficult social status as a widow and a guest in her brother's house, Nazneen's arranged marriage, her destructive passion for Karim that almost costs her sanity, the death of her son, Hasina's life of misery, rape and subsequent prostitution, Razia's problems with her son's drug addiction, or Mrs. Islam's desperate attempts to 'become a man by acting like one. One must also recall the numerous stories of patriarchal abuse presented in the novel, the Dhaka garment women getting beaten until disfigurement by their jealous husbands who do not want them to work, the young village girl who is taken to the jungle and raped by one of the men, the death of Monju, whose husband and sister-in-law pour acid on her for refusing to sell her baby boy as her husband had planned. Shanahah runs away from home preferring a life on the streets over obeying her father and moving to Bangladesh. Nazneen leaves both Chanu and Karim and decides to become an independent woman. Mrs. Islam decides to renounce her womanhood and fight patriarchy with its weapons (violence, aggression, and ruthlessness), but in the process becomes the very thing she initially despised. Razia bravely faces her drug-addict son and locks him up in a room until he renounces heroin.

Anam depicts the plight of women who were warriors of war and turned into victims of sexual violence through Sharmeen's character. Many of these women were punished for standing up against the Pakistani army and its ruthless laws. Despite having paid an unbearable price for loyalty to their country, their

male partners refused to accept them and they never got their respect back. While men survivors were called heroes of the war and revered for their brave participation, women did not get their deserving position. There are several other female characters in Anam's novel like Rehana's neighbor, Mrs. Chowdhury, and her daughter Silvi. However, Anam provides us with a glimpse of the Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971 through the eyes of Rehana's family. In the novel, several women characters project that despite struggling immensely, they stand nowhere in front of men. Like men, women also put in their best efforts and shouldered their responsibilities for their country. However, the patriarchal mindset never allowed women to be liberated from being put under the lens of judgment and scrutiny. Even in their own country, women lack the feeling of belonging and are made to feel like an 'outsider'. Conclusion: Maya Angelou in her autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* states, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you". The novel *A Golden Age* criticizes the male-dominated society which floods women's lives with sufferings and miseries, especially during wars. Tahmima Anam tries to voice the suppressed voices and experiences of Bengali women during the Liberation War in Bangladesh. She exposes the rigid social norms and beliefs that force women into the peripheral regions of society and neglect their representation in historical records. She represents female emotions and struggles during war, crises that often go neglected. The evil wars and patriarchy trying to supersede women's honor by uprooting them savagely so that they lose the confidence to confront male supremacy: As a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males by transforming biological sex into politicized gender, which prioritizes the male while making the woman different (unequal), less than, or the 'Other'. The women are caged in the pre-defined moral codes, social norms, and cultural beliefs that lay impediments to creating an individual identity for them. Women are objectified and made to feel like 'Other' or an outsider in their own families

and homeland. Anam has pointed out the actions of the Pakistani Army towards Bengali women as the outbreak of misogynist ideas and patriarchal strategies to torture women.

The ultimate conclusion of *Brick Lane* is that all heterosexual relations will result in the woman getting hurt, abused, or at best abandoned. The only valid and lasting human relationship is true female friendship, depicted in the novel's final passages, with Nazneen being taken on a surprise outing to a skating rink by her friend Razia and her daughters Shahana and Bibi. The first thing Nazneen ever watched on British TV after her arrival in London was ice skating – for her, the movements of the skaters embody the very idea of Western freedom. But the first time she watches ice skating on TV. It is performed by a couple, a man and a woman, and it seems to her that the man is lifting the woman and allowing her to float. In the end of the novel, when they reach the skating rink, there is only a solitary woman on the ice, not covered in makeup and sequins, but wearing a plain pair of jeans. The feminist implications are obvious here: Nazneen can lift her weight, she can fly and soar even without the help of a male figure. Additionally, the solitary woman in jeans on the ice stands for female self-sufficiency and self-dependency. Feminine resilience is also pictured. One of the novel's most moving passages details the rebellion of Bangladeshi village women who are instructed by the sex worker Shenaz to withhold sex from their husbands to make them fetch water. Beauty and physical intimacy are for most women the only way to 'control' and 'subdue' men – unfortunately, both have a painfully clear expiry date. The only valid alternative is female self-sufficiency: resisting and ultimately renouncing men, and even heterosexual relationships, in favor of a solid, truthful and supportive female communion.

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