

Subverting the Traditional Roles of Gender: A Diasporic Study of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) is a notable South Asian literary work about the diasporic experiences of Bangladeshi immigrants in London. The novel has been critically acclaimed as a prominent tale offering the contrasting accounts of migration across genders and providing a nuanced perspective on the process of migration or diaspora by highlighting both its negative and positive sides. While the challenging role of migration is delineated through the cultural dislocation, lack of roots, and nostalgia experienced by male migrants, the positive perspective emerges while considering the freedom of women migrants, specifically Nazneen, in the diasporic space. The paper primarily investigates the emancipatory role of migration by exploring its impact on freeing women from the patriarchal and cultural constraints of their home countries, while also considering the negative consequences of movement on migrants in general as depicted in the novel. The primary objective of the study is to investigate how migration serves as a catalyst for women migrants, enabling them to transition from a state of submissiveness to the assertive expression of their desires within a new environment. It attempts to examine the power of 'Third World women' in claiming their agency in a diasporic space by subverting the traditional gender roles accorded to them in their native countries. The study draws upon the theoretical framework of 'Diaspora Studies,' (more precisely its gendered perspective) to provide a broader understanding of the subject.

Keywords: Diaspora, gender, patriarchy, authority, freedom, agency

Introduction and Theoretical Background

In the modern era characterized by increased mobility, the movement of people from one place to another has become a prevalent phenomenon. With the advent of globalization and transnationalism, there has been a significant increase in the number of immigrants. On June 13, 2011, *The Times of India* reported that there has been a 42 per cent increase in migrant population across the world since 2000. Similarly, the Geneva-based World Organization for Migration reported that the total population of migrants rose from 15 crore in 2000 to 21.40 crore in 2011 throughout the world. In the past, people used to migrate due to unfavourable circumstances in their home countries. However, nowadays, individuals choose to migrate willingly to other countries in order to seek new possibilities, scholastic success, and economic benefits. Due to the growing number of people moving across borders, there is a growing concern among critics to analyse the experiences of immigrants in the newly adopted nations. Consequently, the study of diaspora has become increasingly important.

The term 'diaspora' is etymologically derived from two Greek words, 'dia,' meaning across, and 'speiro,' meaning to sow or scatter seeds. The Oxford English Dictionary defines diaspora as "the dispersal of the Jews beyond Israel . . . [or in general] the dispersion of people from their traditional homeland to another land." Ashcroft and Griffiths (2000) define it as "the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands to new regions" (p. 56). Barker (2004) is of the view that diasporas are "concerned with the ideas of travel, migration, scattering, displacement, homes and borders" (p. 51). Generally speaking, diaspora is defined as the movement of people from their homelands to new countries. It refers to any community or population that lives in any country other than their homelands. Some of the pioneering diasporic theorists who have made significant contribution to the burgeoning area of diaspora studies include; William Safran, James Clifford, Gabriel Sheffer, Robin Cohen, Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, Khachig Tololyan, Vijaya Mishra, Akram Al Deek, etc.

Originally, the term diaspora denoted the movement of Greeks during the Hellenic era, Jews during the fall of Jerusalem, and Africans in the 1960s. In other words, previously migration was primarily associated with the forced displacement of individuals from their homelands

owing to the unfavourable circumstances prevailing there. But the traditional implication of diaspora, involving experiences of pain, exile, and expulsion has changed in the contemporary usage. Diaspora now encompasses individuals who willingly leave their homelands in search of a better life in different countries. It now denotes the embracing of transnational or pluralistic identities and cosmopolitanism, rather than focusing on the loss of home and familiarity. In other words, both voluntary and enforced migration are now included in the domain of diaspora. The common diasporic themes include rootlessness, homelessness, lack of belonging, nostalgia or longing for homeland, alienation, cultural conflict and existential crisis.

Initially, theorists primarily examined diaspora from a broader viewpoint with a greater emphasis on male migration experiences, thereby portraying diaspora as a phenomenon centred on men. However, critics have recently shifted their focus towards understanding the impact of migration on women. This interest has risen due to the substantial rise in the number of women leaving their native countries. Previously, women would migrate alongside their parents or spouses, essentially as members of their families. However, they have now begun to migrate independently in order to ensure a more promising future. They lead a luxurious and affluent life in the newly adopted countries while providing financial assistance to their families in their countries of origin. As critics have become aware of the difference in the migration experiences across genders, they have begun to differentiate between male and female accounts and narratives of migration. Consequently, a gendered perspective of diaspora has come into being.

There has been an increased emphasis on examining the gendered aspect of diaspora and the subsequent transformations women experience after migrating to new countries. Brettell in her seminal book *Gender and Migration* (2016) emphasizes on looking at “migration through a gendered perspective and to gain insights about the experiences of women during the process” (qtd. in Ahmed, 2021, p. 1). Consequently, numerous critics have endeavoured to comprehend how women’s accounts or narratives of migration, in addition to addressing common issues faced by diasporic communities, delve into the additional facets of diaspora. Bonifacio’s seminal work, *Feminism and Migration: Cross-Cultural Engagements* (2012) is a contemporary work that examines diaspora through a gendered perspective. A general overview of the book

reveals that mobility plays a vital role in changing the traditional gender roles of women. Similarly, Thimm in his book *Understanding Muslim Mobilities and Gender* (2018) examines the impact of migration on Muslim women migrants and concludes that migration affects subjectivity of women to a greater extent. These theorists have concluded that women narratives of migration not only address universal issues found in all diasporic narratives, but also highlight how mobility leads to a shift from subjugation to empowerment of women.

An overarching conclusion drawn from the research conducted on the gendered viewpoint of diaspora is that diaspora serves as a catalyst for empowering 'Third World' women immigrants and facilitating their quest for autonomy. Upon encountering Western culture, which grants females the autonomy to determine their life choices, women coming from Third World countries begin to critically evaluate their social standing. As a result of enduring years of male dominance, they start to question their position in life. The socio-cultural framework of the newly adopted countries enables them to deviate from conventional indigenous norms and expectations and empowers them to develop resilience and transform their personal perspectives. The exposure to foreign culture enables them to liberate themselves from the patriarchal constraints that bound them in their countries. Hence, it may be inferred that female migrants undergo a favourable transformation during the migration process. Migration acts as an agency for them to assert their will.

Migration as a Transformative Agency for Women in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

Monica Ali, an English writer of Bangladeshi origin, is a highly accomplished and influential author of the contemporary times. She holds a prominent position among current South Asian writers and is frequently associated with acclaimed women authors such as Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kamila Shamsie, Tahmima Anam, etc. She gained recognition after publishing her first novel, *Brick Lane* in 2003. Subsequently, she authored a multitude of books, the principal among which include *Alentejo Blue* (2006), *In the Kitchen* (2009), *Untold Story* (2011), and *Love Marriage* (2022). Ali has held numerous prestigious positions and garnered multiple literary accolades. In 2003, *Granta*

Magazine included her in the prestigious list of the top twenty “Best of Young British novelists.”

Ali was born in Dhaka Bangladesh in 1967. Due to the outbreak of the Bangladeshi Liberation War in 1971, Ali’s family moved to England in the same year. Ali was three years old at that time and since then she has been living there. Despite having settled in England now, Ali maintains a profound connection with her native country. She frequently expresses nostalgia for her origins and consequently writes about her experiences of living away from her home. Ali’s writings demonstrate her profound sense of displacement, as her characters yearn for a sense of belonging and experience a profound lack of rootedness in an unfamiliar land. By bringing the complexities and problems of living away from one’s homeland to the fore, Ali becomes a representative of Bangladeshi immigrants in London. As a female writer who belongs to a diasporic community, Ali’s writings mostly revolve around the themes of ‘identity and belonging.’ She skilfully portrays the difficulties faced by immigrants, particularly women, as they strive to adjust in a new environment.

Brick Lane, which is the focus of the study of the paper, is an influential work in the domain of contemporary South Asian literature. The novel was published in 2003 and is considered to be Ali’s Magnum Opus. The novel is set between 1985 and 2002 in East London, with intermittent shifts to Bangladesh through the protagonist’s memories. In 2003, the novel received a nomination for the prestigious Booker Prize, and in 2007 it was successfully made into a film. Ali’s work garnered international acclaim and facilitated her in craving a distinct identity in the expanding realm of South Asian diasporic literature. Although, the novel’s title alludes to a specific location situated in the eastern part of London, it provides scant information regarding the various facets of this particular area. Instead, the story primarily centres on portraying the immigrant encounters of the Bangladeshi immigrant community in London. The tale revolves around Nazneen, a young rural girl from Bangladesh. Nazneen marries Chanu, a fat, unattractive and opinionated man, almost twice her age. Subsequently, the couple relocates to Tower Hamlets, a deprived residential area in London, where Chanu has already worked before his marriage. Apart from Nazneen and Chanu, another important character in the novel is Karim, a Sylheti lad, and the

nephew of a Sweatshop seller, with whom Nazneen falls in love with in the later part of the novel.

The novel encompasses a multitude of themes, such as class, fate, love, history, nostalgia, familial relationships, gender inequality, economic disparity, and cultural diversity. In addition, it predominantly focuses on the issue of migration and its consequences. Many critics have summed up *Brick Lane* as a distinct novel focusing “almost exclusively on the lives of Bangladeshi women” (Masure, 2021, p. 2) in London. The novel explores the impact of migration on different genders. It brings both challenging and celebrating aspects of migration to the fore. While the negative aspects are revealed through Chanu’s alienation and the difficulties and challenges he encounters during his stay in London, the positive aspects are described through the growth and development of Nazneen. The major part of the novel primarily focuses on the experiences of female migrants through the character of Nazneen, who serves as a representative voice of Bangladeshi migrant women. Nazneen’s evolution within the diasporic realm is predominantly depicted through her progression from passivity to the expression of her desires.

Chanu is a well-educated man. He serves as a representative for several Bangladeshi immigrants who hold a positive outlook on having a prosperous future in a foreign country. He arrives in London with the intention of securing a promising future and financial stability for his family. Upon his arrival, he is optimistic about his decision of migration. He views London as a ‘Promised Land.’ He denounces the Sylhetis for their reluctance to venture outside their homelands and their lack of ambition to develop and thrive.

While Chanu appears to be adapting well in the bustling city of London, his wife, Nazneen experiences a sense of dislocation after leaving her homeland. Nazneen, a member of a conservative Bangladeshi Muslim community, embodies the archetype of a conventional obedient wife who dutifully complies with every decision of her husband. She has been raised in a community that demands her to acknowledge her husband’s domination. From an early age, she has lived with the principle that “what could not be changed, must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne” (Ali, 2000, p. 4). Upon her arrival in London, she finds herself restricted within the walls of her small apartment, adhering to the role of a typical housewife. She dedicates

her time to culinary activities, maintaining the cleanliness of her living space, and attending to the needs of her spouse. She relies completely on her husband as she lacks any external contacts. Occasionally, she is visited by Mrs. Islam and Razia, her neighbours in Tower Hamlets. She has surrendered to destiny and thus embraced everything that has been thrust upon her, regardless of its fairness or unfairness. She unquestioningly accepts her husband's authority and silently accepts a subordinate role because this position has been assigned to her by her family and society since birth.

On the other hand, Hasina, Nazneen's sister has a rebellious nature. At the age of sixteen, she elopes with a boy named Malek and remains unaffected by the society's response to her actions. In her letter to Nazneen, we learn that Hasina's marriage is short-lived due to her husband's violent behaviour. Hasina escapes her husband's residence and moves alone to Dhaka. Subsequently, she descends into the profession of prostitution, then starts working in a garment factory, and ultimately experiences failure in her second marriage as well. Nazneen considers herself to be fortunate while comparing her circumstances with Hasina's, as her husband, although being unattractive, fat and old, refrains from subjecting her to any form of mistreatment.

Nazneen does not move to London by choice, she has been taken along by her husband. Because of having been raised in the rural Bangladeshi village Gouripur, surrounded by birds, water, and buffaloes, Nazneen perceives the modern city of London as unattractive and exasperating. She finds it challenging to adapt to the sudden shift from the leisurely pace of village life to the fast-paced lifestyle of London. Upon reaching London, Nazneen dutifully assumes the role of a submissive wife, diligently tending to the household and her husband's needs without expressing any discontent. Over time, she experiences a state of confusion due to her lack of belonging. She experiences frustration due to the lack of progress in her life in London. As Chanu is her sole connection in London, she finds the external environment and the people of London unfamiliar and hostile. In London, she experiences a greater longing for her deceased mother, Rupban, compared to the level of longing she felt in Bangladesh.

London is a place full of mysteries for Nazneen. Her life is that of a 'displaced person, unseen and unseeing.' She often feels that she has

been separated from her homeland and everything familiar has been abruptly taken away from her. She is unable to erase the memory of her homeland. She finds herself torn between the indigenous customs and the emerging opportunities. Although, she frequently yearns for her native place, she has no option except to stay. She experiences profound melancholy due to her static existence and feels a sense of isolation from her surroundings. Her longing for Bangladesh is so intense that she frequently dreams about it. As Ali (2000) remarks about Nazneen, "Real life. . . [comes] to her only at night" (p. 13), when she has the opportunity to experience the essence of her birthplace in her dreams. For Nazneen, Bangladesh is a place with boundless nature, space, and the freedom to roam. In contrast, the external world of London is inhospitable for her owing to the lack of her connection with it. She feels fearful and anxious about crossing the road, anticipating a potential collision with a car. Nazneen struggles while trying to grasp the English language as well. Her verbal communication is limited to expressions like 'thank you' and 'sorry.' Chanu is hardly bothered. He is of the view that it is unnecessary for Nazneen to acquire English language skills because she has very limited connections in London. He says, "Where is the need anyway?" (Ali, 2000, p. 20). When Nazneen mispronounces ice skating as 'ice-e-skating, Chanu remarks that the failure to grasp the language "is a common problem in Bengalis" (Ali, 2000, p. 20). Instead of taking the role of her spouse, Chanu undertakes the one of a critic. Over time, Nazneen becomes increasingly frustrated with her husband's conduct.

London does not prove to be a land of opportunities for Chanu as well. Besides having several degrees, he is not able to get any classy job here. He works extremely hard to earn a good livelihood. As Ali (2000) remarks about Chanu, "Whatever ... [he] could. So much hard work and so little reward" (p. 19). He works as a civil servant for a while but soon quits this job after his only son, Raqib dies in infancy. After this, Chanu is not able to accomplish much. Instead, he drifts in and out of work because of being offered menial jobs that never uphold the sophistication he thinks he deserves. His disappointment in London is revealed through his conversation with Dr. Azad when he says, "When I came, I was a young man. I had ambitions. Big dreams. ... I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me. ... And then I found things were a bit different" (Ali, 2000, p. 18). Chanu is still trying to achieve what he had dreamt of. He is struggling to provide a better future to his family,

mainly his two daughters, Shahana and Bibi, who were born after his son's death. As Shahana and Bibi advance in age, Chanu seems to grow more concerned about their future. He is pretty aware that he has not been able to progress as per his expectations in London. His daughter, Shahana, is bold enough to reject her parental Bengali heritage openly. Owing to the economic and cultural insecurity of his family in an alien land, Chanu decides to fly back to his homeland to start a fresh journey. He starts working as a cab driver to arrange the travel expenses for the same. He also allows Nazneen to sew clothes to arrange the money and borrows some money from a wealthy woman, Mrs. Islam, for their eventual trip home.

As Nazneen starts her sewing business, she meets a Sylheti lad, a sweatshop owner's nephew, Karim. Karim supplies the sewing material to Nazneen from his uncle's store. As time passes, the duo fall in love with each other and develop an affair. Nazneen's admiration for Karim manifests her desire to be with a man who values her as an equal being, not a "good worker" (Ali, 2000, p. 10). However, later Nazneen's love and attraction for Karim recede because rather than acting as a soulmate of Nazneen, Karim proves to be a dominant man whose principal aim in life is to establish a glorious Islamic kingdom.

While living a disillusioned life in London, the ice skating show on TV is the only source of happiness for Nazneen. Watching such shows often make her ponder about women dancers' freedom. The ice skating becomes a motif in the novel to portray Nazneen's desire to liberate herself from cultural and gender constraints. While commenting on Nazneen's expression while watching such shows, Ali (2000) writes that it was as if "the old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white light glory" (p. 24). The episode of ice skating truly awakens Nazneen's consciousness to a greater extent.

With her husband's permission, Nazneen starts sewing clothes to gather money to return to Bangladesh. Starting her own business impels her to search for her independence and security. As Nazneen starts earning, the power of decision-making gradually shifts to her. While earlier she relied on her husband for everything, she now becomes independent. Her transition from a housewife to a working woman has been a long journey and has been mainly motivated by the liberal society of London. For Nazneen, "the new cultural modalities in host society offer many

ways to challenge, transform or negotiate traditional prescriptions of womanhood” (Bonifacio, 2012, p. 6). The success, independence, and prosperity of women in London greatly inspire her. Watching women folk earning for themselves and making decisions about their lives instils confidence in Nazneen. Razia, her Bengali neighbour who used to visit her, also contributes to Nazneen’s growth. Razia is the sole bread earner of her family in London. She is curious about learning English and attaining English citizenship. Considering women like Razia, Nazneen realizes that, like these women, she can also take a stand for herself and her daughters. It arouses hope in her that she can live an independent life free from the cultural and gender constraints.

In the case of Nazneen, “international mobility has power to bring a dramatic change in traditional gender roles and aspirations” (Bonifacio, 2012, p. 3). Nazneen’s ultimate moment of decision-making and assertion of will is revealed when Chanu finally decides to return to Bangladesh, but Nazneen stays to provide a better life to her daughters. The novel’s end is marked by the reversal in Chanu’s perception. While initially, he was very optimistic about his decision to move to London, he feels utterly disappointed as time passes. Due to his failure to climb the social ladder in London and after experiencing multiple losses, Chanu decides to return to Bangladesh to make a fresh start. Similarly, there occurs a change in Nazneen’s perception. While initially, after arriving in London, she longed for her homeland, she is not ready to accompany her husband back to her homeland now. She decides to stay with her daughters and tells Chanu, “No, I can’t go with you” (Ali, 2000, p. 358). Her economic independence has given her a positive vision of life. By taking the decision to stay in London, she becomes an independent woman who can stand up for herself.

Nazneen thus undergoes a drastic change from being a docile and dependent wife to an independent woman who has the power to take care of herself and her children in a foreign land. Migration thus enriches her vision by helping her to move from “shame to tentative self-possession, from a willing submission to a willing belief in their agency, from a silence both voluntary and culturally conditioned to a yell of liberation” (Masure, 2021, p. 2). At the end of the story, Nazneen goes for ice skating for the first time, revealing her initial steps towards leading an independent life. The novel ends with Razia’s uplifting remark to Nazneen, “This is England You can do whatever you like”

(Ali, 2000, p. 369). The comment signifies Nazneen's ultimate liberation from traditional entanglements and the start of a new journey.

Conclusion

Analysing the novel carefully, it can be concluded that *Brick Lane* offers contrasting experiences of migration across genders. While the challenges associated with the aftermath of migration or diaspora are delineated through the complicated lives of male immigrants in a foreign land, the favourable aspect is exemplified through the female immigrants' transformation from being submissive and subservient to being strong and independent. While the male immigrants cannot withstand the challenges in England, the women characters integrate well with time. The diasporic space provides an opportunity for women immigrants to gain autonomy from the cultural and patriarchal oppression of their homelands. It becomes a site of liberation for them. Nazneen's autonomy becomes representative of the autonomy of women who undergo the experience of migration in general. The novel overall explores issues of identity, cultural clashes along with the evolving roles of women within the context of migration and settlement in a new country.

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