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Representation of Muslim Immigrant Experience in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

Abstract:

Ethnicity is a much talked issue in the present world and there are a number of issues due to Britain's failure to incorporate the immigrant community. The migrants depicted in the novel, *Brick Lane* hate the differences in society and longs for a world where people belonging to different religions and different cultures are treated alike. Monica Ali incorporates the Western woman's perception of South Asian women and the South Asian women's perception of themselves in the west and their native place. The present paper focuses on Monica Ali's novel, *Brick Lane* and examines the experiences of migrant Muslims in Britain and the problems of multiculturalism and discrimination they encounter there based on race and religion.

Key words: ethnicity, migrants, discrimination, culture, religion

According to Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* (1967), ethnicity ordinarily refers to certain quality or affiliation based on hereditary as well as cultural considerations (781). Winick's *Dictionary of Anthropology* (1946) does not incorporate the term ethnicity. But it defines 'ethnic' as having somewhat restricted connotation primarily referring to a group distinguishable by certain common cultural attributes like a linguistic group. Ethnicity is a much talked issue in the present world and there are a number of issues due to Britain's failure to incorporate the immigrant community. The present paper focuses on Monica Ali's novel, *Brick Lane* and examines the experiences of migrant Muslims in Britain and the problems of multiculturalism and discrimination they encounter there based on race and religion.

Monica Ali was the daughter of a British mother and Bangladeshi father. *Brick Lane* is not entirely based on her own experiences. In her essay, “Where I’m Coming From”, Monica Ali reveals her inspiration to write *Brick Lane*:

My experience, for instance, of conflict between first- and second-generation immigrants. The stories that my father used to tell about village life. A book of case studies about Bangladeshi women garment workers in Dhaka and the East End of London, desperate lives drawn together by the common goal of self-empowerment. (Ali, par4)

In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali candidly describes the part of London where the migrants segregated and another side of England which the migrants are not familiar with. Ali was severely criticized for her negative portrayal of the life of Muslim migrants in Tower Hamlets, London. Ali states,

Nazneen had finished the housework ... but for a while she would let the time pass. It was hot and the sun fell flat on the metal window frames and glared off the glass ... Two old men in white Panjabi-pyjama and skullcaps walked along the path, slowly, as if they did not want to go where they were going. A thin brown dog sniffed along to the middle of the grass and defecated. The breeze on Nazneen’s face was thick with the smell from the over-flowing communal bins. (18)

Nazneen gets another picture of England as she stood by Shahana’s desk. “A cracked mug bearing a picture of a thatch-roofed cottage and a mouse in trousers leaning on the gatepost. It was a picture of England. Roses around the door. Nazneen had never seen this England but now, idly, the idea formed that she would visit it” (438).

Chanu, Nazneen’s husband too hates differences in society and longs for a world where people belonging to different religions and different cultures are treated alike. He objects when Mrs. Islam advised him to send his daughters to the madrassa, the new mosque school. He wanted to teach his daughters about the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and the Qur’anic philosophies rather than send his children to the madrassa. But his enthusiasm vanishes when he realizes that his religion is in danger in London. Chanu realized his inferior status as a Muslim migrant in the West. Nazneen realized that though they took different paths they journeyed together. “Where Nazneen turned in, he turned out; where she strove to accept, he was determined to struggle;

where she attempted to dull her mind and numb her thoughts, he argued aloud; while she wanted to look neither to the past nor to the future, he lived exclusively in both” (121).

Chanu’s hatred for Christianity and Western civilization intensified as he faced more insults from the West. He spoke more of the racism in London society. He warned Nazneen “about making friends with ‘them’, as though that were a possibility. *All the time they are polite. They smile. They say ‘please’ this and ‘thank you’ that. Make no mistake about it, they shake your hand with the right and with the left they stab you in the back*” (italicized in the original 72). He told Nazneen that if he painted his skin pink and white then there would be no problem.

There is a perceptible change in Chanu who had earlier tried to instruct his daughters about various cultures and religion. He scorns European civilization and proudly informs his Westernized daughters,

All these people who look down onto us do not know what I am going to tell you ... Who was it who saved the work of Plato and Aristotle for the West during the Dark Ages? Us. It was us. Muslims. We saved the work so that your so-called St. Thomas could claim it for his own discovery. That is the standard of our scholarship and that is the standard of their gratitude. (215)

He shows contempt for the Western education and wanted his daughters to take pride in Islam. He says, “Dark Ages ... This is what they are calling it in these damn Christian books. Is this what they teach you in school? ... It was the Golden Age of Islam, the height of civilization. Don’t forget it. Take pride, or all is lost” (215). But Nazneen’s sister, Hasina’s letters from her native place, Dhaka indicate the works of Christian missionaries in Bangladesh. They were revered and respected by the Muslims in Dhaka. Hasina was saved from the House of Falling Women by the efforts of the Canadian Brother, Andrew. She got a job as maid in the house of Lovely and James.

Meanwhile Monica Ali in *Brick Lane* incorporates the struggle of a Black ‘invisible’ man. He declares in a Bengal Tiger meeting, “I tried Pentecostal, Baptist, ChurchaEngla’, Cat’olic, Seventh Day, Churcha Christ, Healin’ Churcha Christ, Jehovah Witness, Evangelical, Anglical, and the Miracle Church of our Saviour. All loos’n’ lax like anything. Loose *and* lax” (279). At one meeting he states that while he was young black kids went to black clubs and white kids went to white clubs. He states, “I like to see it all mix up” (286). His ‘neither here nor there’

situation is evident when Nazneen finds him praying in the midst of the violent clash during the Bengal Tigers agitation. When Nazneen asks him to run away, he states, “‘I is praying to Allah to save all these boys.Can’t get up now’. ‘Allah’, said Nazneen ... ‘does not want your prayer now. He wants you to save yourself’” (471). Soon he is disillusioned with his Islamic prayers and adopts the Christian way. He lifts his face to heaven and prays “‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ... I will fear no evil: for thou art with me ... Thy rod and thy staff comfort me” (472). As Mala Pandurang states citing HomiBhabha in “Conceptualizing *Emigrant* Indian Female Subjectivity”, “caught between worlds that collide as often as they collude, are we representative of anything but ourselves?” (88).

Taking the case of Mrs. Islam, Monica Ali points out that a successful Muslim woman in London does not wear burqa. Mrs. Islam claims that she hates to mix with the people of other cultures. As she puts it, “Mixing with all sorts: Turkish, English, Jewish. All sorts. I am not old-fashioned ... I don’t wear burkha. I keep purdah in my mind ... 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” (29).The migrants are fearful that their culture and religion are in danger in the west.

Monica Ali incorporates the Western woman’s perception of South Asian women like Nazneen, Nazneen’s view of herself in the West and her picture of Western woman. Nazneen saw herself clearly following her husband, head bowed, hair covered, and felt pleased. She felt invisible while walking along the streets of London. Nazneen who walked alone along the London streets too felt her invisibility. She identifies the peculiar gaze of the Western woman.

... a woman raised her head from checking her lipstick in a compact mirror and stared back at Nazneen. The woman had short blond hair cut in an efficient style around her jaw. She looked at Nazneen with a ready kindness, a half-smile on her lips, but in her eyes there was nothing. It was the way she might look at a familiar object, her keys that she had just found, the kitchen table as she wiped the juice her daughter had spilled, a blankness reserved for known quantities like pieces of furniture or brown women in saris who cooked rice and raised their children and obeyed their husbands. (391)

The figure of a South Asian woman that Western academia propagates is probably like that of a widow burning on a funeral pyre in India as part of Sati like in Emile Durkheim’s work on

suicide. It becomes the responsibility of white man and white woman to civilize the barbaric East. Citing L. Ahmed, Nirmal Puwar states in “Melodramatic Postures” that while men in the Victorian establishment resisted the feminist cause in their own countries, they captured the language of feminism and colonialism and “... redirected it, in the service of colonialism, toward other men and the cultures of other men” (24). Spivak too has spoken of white men saving brown women from brown men. Western women who recognize the fact that these women are more badly treated than themselves take the role of enlightened agents in their mission to rescue them. Economic, political, social, imperial, and patriarchal factors impinge upon the lives of Asian women and studies need to concentrate on their experiences rather than their cultures. The image of South Asian women bent over their sewing machines working in sweatshops or as home workers and their work conditions evoke pity.

Monica Ali also highlights the high rate of drug abuse among the Muslim migrants. Dr. Azad and Chanu discussed the harmful effects of heroin use among the younger generation of Muslim migrants. The increase in the rate of heroin abuse was alarmingly high. Yet there were no measures on the part of elders to prevent it nor were there enough funding for counsellors and out-reach workers. Razia’s son, Tariq went out too often and she hardly saw him some weeks. Karim states that the government promoted the use of drugs among the Muslim migrants. The government adopted such measures to suppress them as was done in the case of Black Panthers. Whites are not bothered when the struggles of the blacks are confined to the ghettos. Karim says, “The FBI – the Government – they got together with the Mafia, and flooded the blacks with drugs, set them up with all the guns and stuff, so they can just get high and shoot each other. Long as it stays in the ghettos, man, they’re not bothered” (311). Karim states that “as long as they’re on the scag, they stay away from religion. And the Government – it’s more scared of Islam than heroin” (311). Analyzing Nilofar Iqbal’s short story “The Coach” and Parveen Malik’s “The Magic Flower” in “Pakistani Women’s Writing”, Manaf and Ahmad points out that lonely and rejected children are prone to danger when their families are affected by the drudgery of work. Women are forced to spend longer hours at work for minimal wages and abandon their duties as mothers for the more pressing demand to become providers. Women are often low paid and denied the benefits of healthcare or job security. “Children inevitably become casualties as the demands of work take their parents away from them. To escape the “poison of loneliness”,

they create their own alternative, idealistic worlds which often prove to be only a temporary respite from the disappointing and cruel reality of their lives” (5).

Dr. Azad who is worried about the younger generation attracted to the Western ways remarks, “... now our children are copying what they see here, going to the pub, to nightclubs. Or drinking at home in their bedrooms where their parents think they are perfectly safe. The problem is our community is not properly educated about these things” (31). But Chanu finds, “Back home, if you drink you risk being an outcast. In London, if you don’t drink you risk the same thing” (110).

Yet another issue that Ali has addressed is the lives of migrants in the post-9/11 era, a period characterized by heightened suspicion of South Asians and intense efforts to counter terrorism. *Brick Lane* addresses the impact of September 11 attacks on the lives of Muslim migrants. The 11th September 2001 incident aroused huge media interest in the British Muslim community. Chanu, Nazneen and the daughters watch the event on their television. Nazneen felt that they have survived something together as a family. Chanu who no longer spoke to his audience muttered and mumbled about the backlash. “Sorupa’s daughter was the first, but not the only one. Walking in the street, on her way to college, she had her hijab pulled off. Razia wore her Union Jack sweatshirt and it was spat on” (368). Chanu decided to return to Bangladesh. He told to himself, “Any day, any moment, life can end. There’s been enough planning” (369).

Mosques, homes, buildings and Muslim organizations were the targets of anti-Muslim retaliation. Even Sikhs who were suspected to be Muslims and hijab wearing women were physically and verbally assaulted. Ahmed refers to President George Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair who issued the ultimatum “You’re either with us or against us” (48). Ahmed refers to the provocative columnist Julie Brurchill who described *burqas* ‘mobile prisons’. She also refers to British Prime Minister’s wife Cherie Blair who following the lead of George Bush’s wife, Laura spoke of *burqaas* a “symbol of women’s oppression” (48).

Since the 9/11 attack, Muslims are viewed with suspicion by the West. Analyzing the situation in France, Tariq Modood remarks, “This prohibiting of Muslim identity in public space has so far been taken farthest in France, where in 2004 the parliament passed, with little debate but an

overwhelming majority, a ban on the wearing of ‘ostentatious’ religious symbols (primarily the hijab or headscarf in public schools)” (51).

The Muslims were branded terrorists though the majority of Muslims condemn acts of terror. As of 2015, twelve Nobel Prizewinners have been Muslims. Of these seven were the winners of Nobel Peace Prize. In *Brick Lane*, Karim says, “Islamic terrorists. Islamic terrorists. That’s all you hear. You never hear Catholic terrorist, do you? Or Hindu terrorist? What about Jewish terrorist?”

The younger generation of immigrants refuses to take things lightly like the older generation did. They used the Islamic principles to fight against the West. Karim’s Bengal Tigers is a fundamentalist group that claimed to work for the welfare of all Muslims. It was his father’s painful experience as a bus conductor that urged him to turn to fundamentalism. He reveals his father’s experience: “He had to retire because of the nerves. Couldn’t hang on any longer. Twenty-five years as a bus conductor, and now he can’t even leave the flat. That’s what you get, man. That’s what you get ... All those years on the bus, getting called all the names, taking all the cheek. Kids giving him cheek. Men giving aggro. Got a tooth knocked out. Someone was sick on his shoes, man” (232-33). He convinces the youth about the need to fight like the Prophet rather than adopting the attitude of Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi like his father. The youth are headed to the path of war believing that the Prophet preferred war and violence.

The migrant experiences depicted are not unidimensional. Various characters are depicted in starkly different manner. The need to belong and the search for roots are the two major aspects that we find in immigrant experience. In *Borderlands*, Gloria Anzaldua writes:

It is not a comfortable place to live in, this place of contradictions. However, there have been compensations and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping in touch with one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an ‘alien’ element. [...] I have a sense that certain ‘faculties’ [...] and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated and awakened. (unpaginated preface)

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