

Vol 2 Issue 10 April 2013

Impact Factor : 0.1870

ISSN No :2231-5063

Monthly Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

*Golden Research
Thoughts*

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IMPACT FACTOR : 0.2105

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2230-7850

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PORTRAYAL OF MUSLIM WOMEN CHARACTERS IN MONICA ALI'S BRICK LANE

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Abstract:

Mostly the literature of the present depicts the difference between male and female, the rich and the poor; colonizers and the colonized, and oppressors and the oppressed. From the rise of the feminism in the world, a variety of writers- both male and female, tried their level best to show the plight of women, their inferiority, economic insecurity, social discrimination and all that. At the same time the literature of the minority was flourishing a lot stating the bad condition of the minority in their concerned state. The women from the minority communities, particularly the black women, came ahead to assert their rights in the patriarchal society. As we say that the literature has the power to change the society, the feminists portrayed many women characters with different qualities in their works to let the world know the condition of women. Some having adhered to the old social structure where the role of women was bound to the household work only and the others challenged the old systems and searched for the new identity for women in the manmade world. The present paper deals with the portrayal of various women characters in Monica Ali's Brick lane.

KEYWORDS:

Postcolonialism, globalization, muslim women, search for identity.

INTRODUCTION :

The term 'postcolonialism' is used by the literary critics to discuss 'the various cultural effects of colonization over the colonized'. The present chapter tries to assess the novel Brick Lane (2003) which is written by Monica Ali, a Bangladeshi immigrant, by taking the postcolonial issues into consideration. It throws light on the condition of women as 'inferior' or 'margin' as has said by Spivak in her "Can the Subaltern Speak?" which says that the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. It tries to point out the record of Nazneen's varied experiences. Nazneen marries a person chosen by her father and tries to be a traditional wife and mother until she falls in love with Karim who becomes an Islamic activist. The novel depicts the journey of Nazneen from the state of dependence to the state of independence. One can easily point out the change in the mentality of Chanu who declares Nazneen at last as the in charge of the house. Nazneen prefers to be a single parent at last instead following her husband to Dhaka or marrying her lover. The novel is thus becomes the record of Nazneen's search for identity. Wendy O' Shea Meddour finds that 'at the beginning of the novel, she has journeyed "towards self-realization," had an affair, separated from her husband, and decided to bring up her two daughters alone'.

Monica Ali was born in 1967 in Dhaka, then part of East Pakistan to a Bengali father and English mother; but in her early childhood her parents settled in Britain, so she places herself on the far side of two cultures, i.e. British and Bangladeshi. She published her first novel Brick Lane in 2003. In her essay "Where

Title PORTRAYAL OF MUSLIM WOMEN CHARACTERS IN MONICA ALI'S BRICK LANE
Source:Golden Research Thoughts [2231-5063]SAYKAR SATISH GOVIND³ yr:2013 vol:2 iss:10

I am Coming From” she explains what inspired her to write the novel.

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, desparate lives drawn together by the common goal of self-empowerment.

Her own statement makes the readers think that the novel doesn't depict the personal experiences of the novelist. Though the novel was shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award and the Booker prize, the inhabitants of Brick Lane did not welcome it. When the book was accepted for screening, many people of Sylheti community protested against it on the ground that she has targeted their community and is saying things which are not true. Some people rejected her as a member of their own community which reminds us of what Ameena Hussein writes in her article “Islam and We”.

“-----I am in that unenviable situation where if I critique the religion I am the friend of the anti-Muslim, and if I keep silent I am the enemy of myself. It is a dilemma I find myself in more and more”. Jane Hiddleston is right to observe that 'Ali's novel to a certain extent sets itself up as a fresh look behind the closed doors of a segregated community positioned at the British capital. Situated at the heart of London, side by side with the financial centre of the city, the geographical area around Brick Lane is nevertheless still conceived as a segregated space for the underprivileged.' Brick Lane, what Monica Ali says, is a 'good old fashioned narrative'. As the writer is from minority community, it is expected what Nicholas Harrison said: “It is indeed 'members' of minority groups who are most liable to stereotyping, and who find themselves unable to act as individuals to the extent that their every action may be taken as typical of the type to which they find themselves assigned.”

At first we are exposed to the special way of life where the family is male dominated and women or girls are in Spivak's term 'subaltern' meaning inferior in rank; so mostly the women think that the God doesn't want them to speak and that is why they were made women and not men. One more thing is that the chastity or purity of a woman is supposed to be the honour of the family to which she belongs and any moral misconduct is a stigma on the family, as a result of which Hasina, Nazneen's sister, when elopes with her lover to Khulna, her father was waiting for her to come back so that he could kill her with an axe. On the other hand he is very happy to find that Nazneen, his elder daughter accepts the person chosen by her father irrespective of his age and facing. She even says to her father that she does not want to see the photograph of her would – be - husband; moreover assures him that she will try to be a good wife like her mother. She thinks the reason behind her marriage is that her father wants to be get rid of me her, and he wants her to go far away, so that she will not be any trouble to him. He does not care who took her off his hands. Yildiz KILIC writes about the novel thus:

Brick Lane demystifies social constraint: women depicted as victim and unwilling accessory to subjection, allude in turn to the greater question of universal opesity and contribute to the definition of the 'British Multicultural Identity': the issue of 'citizenship' and ethnic identity not as continuity of postcolonial disunity, but from a fresh, consolatory and constructive perspective.

Garrett Ziegler points out that 'Brick Lane adds a complex new dimension to its history, using the liberatory commercial space of the global city as a tool for intervening in local commercial space in order to create a transnational gender identity'. Even the use of English words is thought as the break from the traditional image of an woman to the modern woman of the western society.

Colonized are always inferior and the wives and daughters of the colonized are more inferior to them. In this connection Spivak says:

'----- in the context of colonial production , the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in Shadow.'

Inspite of his prestigious degrees Chanu , the husband to Nazneen, works in an office on a lower position. Till the end of the life, he talks of his promotion or his finding for the suitable job. Up to the end he is waiting for his promotion which he never gets. He even thinks of Dr. Azad as mediator for which he extends his friendship by inviting him for meal several times and asking him whether the former's boss has said something about his promotion. Many a time he becomes upset and criticizes his boss and other's as 'racists'; however, no option is left for him instead of resigning the job and leave for Dhaka. About the outlook of the whites, Chanu says;

'-----To a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan' -----
'If a man has only ever driven a rikshaw and never in his life held a book in his hand, then what can you expect from him?' (28)

Chanu is rational in thinking that if you read a lot, no one can disrespect you and that is why he is reading continuously and has his personal library. Though Chanu lives in London for so many years, he has strong memories of the country of his birth. Although he while talking with Mrs. Azad about the freedom to women and the fast Westernization of the migrants positively, he doesn't allow his wife to go outside in the

name of his discredit. Again and again he teaches his daughter to recite Tagore's poem to make her familiar with the country of her origin, but it is Shahana who doesn't like to have any relation to the country of her origin which implies that there is a difference in the attachment for the country of the origin. The second – generation have become one with the new country. Jane Hiddleston has pointed out that the conflict between Nazneen, Chanu and their daughters provides insight into the frustration and disorientation of a particular generation, caught between cultures and struggling to define itself on its own terms, according to its own choices and beliefs as a result of which in the end of the novel only Chanu goes back to Dhaka.

Nazneen is at the centre of the story of this novel. Garrett Ziegler says that 'the novel traces the transformation of Nazneen from a dependent, isolated wife to an independent, Westernized social actor'. Her mother, Rupban, has been tolerating all that which was supposed to be tolerated by the women. To Abba, the father of Nazneen, she is a saint. She believes in the game of Fate.

'We must not stand in the way of Fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate. That way, she will be stronger.' (14)

So she doesn't take her daughter to the hospital. Throughout her life she just waits for the things to happen. She is of the view that God doesn't want the women to ask questions; otherwise He would have made them men. She has two daughters – Nazneen and Hasina.

Banesa describes Nazneen as 'perfect everywhere.' (15) She is an innocent girl who says that there is no need to see the photograph of the person with whom she is going to marry. She says to her father:

'Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma.' (16)

But secretly she looks the photograph of the person who according to her was at least forty years older than her. She doesn't utter a single word of disapproval to the decision made by her father. Looking at the furniture in the house of Chanu, she pleases herself. She is the woman with strong belief in the God and hence she is keeping regular prayers to God and reads any sura from the Quran whenever she is sad. She is afraid when she sees Chanu drinking wine. She knows very well that Chanu doesn't pray regularly and feels that perhaps he might eat a meat of a pig which is against the principles of her religion. She leaves the decision to the God as to when she will meet her sister in her life. Chanu creates a mental picture of her in front of the mind of the person on the other end of the phone by saying:

'She is an unspoiled girl. From the village.'.....'Not beautiful, but not so ugly either. The face is broad, big forehead. Eyes are a bit too close together.'

'Not tall. Not short. Around five foot two. Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children.....She is only eighteen.' (22-23)

It is a point of her self- realization which makes her think that she was a foolish girl who lost her self – regard. Without any complaint she work of cleaning, cooking and washing all day in the home. She is not allowed to go out as it would be insulting to Chanu. Chanu is of the view that if Nazneen goes out and people see her, he will be considered as a fool. Moreover; he assures her that he will bring anything for her. Nazneen is opposed from going out as there is a fear of her rebel.

Nazneen loves her sister the most and for many times she requests her husband to look for Hasina. She eagerly waits for another letter from Hasina. Hasina was born only three days after the death of Banesa. At the age of sixteen, she elopes to Khulna with the nephew of the saw-mill owner. It is supposed as disgrace on the part of her father who sits between the two lemon trees waiting for the return of his daughter so that he could kill her at the entrance of the compound. Nazneen loves her sister the most, so she could not sleep in those days. Monica Ali describes: "Those days Nazneen lay awake listening to the rattling of the corrugated tin roof, starting at the owl calls that no longer sounded like owls but more like a girl felled by an axe on the back of her neck." (16) She never comes back to her paternal home. She is a typical woman who wants that a wife should keep quiet and do her duties without failure to avoid getting beaten by her husband. She honestly feels that her mother-in-law should love her as a daughter as she was the part of her son. She thinks that Nazneen is better wife than her and the latter is trying to be like her sister. Both, Hasina and Nazneen love each other when Hasina is alone in Bangladesh, it worries Nazneen and she cares as to how she might be living as a woman on her own in the city, without a husband, without family, without friends, without protection.

Whenever Nazneen thinks about Hasina, she feels that no good could come out of 'kicking against fate' and thinks that it is not the fate but the person is responsible. Her thinking shows her roots from the village in Bangladesh. She says to herself: "If Chanu came home this evening and found the place untidy and the spices not even ground, could she put her hands like so and say, don't ask me why nothing is prepared, it was not I who decided it, it was fate. A wife could reasonably be beaten for a lesser offence." (22)

Mrs. Azad had a fate nose. She wears a short purple skirt. When Nazneen first meet her, her hair

was cropped close like a man's. A cigarette was there in her hand. She doesn't mind to adjust her underwear with a thumb in front of the guests. She climbed inside an armchair. She tucked her feet up and her skirt rode up her large brown thighs. She openly insults her husband by saying:

'For the love of God ! '—'get your friends some drinks. I'm the one who's been on my feet all day.'—'I'll have a beer.' (109)

She knows very well that her husband finds happiness in reading books because he can't bear the reality of life. She is very influenced by the western culture. While talking to Chanu she says;

“Let me tell you a few simple facts. Fact: we live in a western society. Fact: our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact: that's no bad thing. My daughter is free to come and go. Do I wish I had enjoyed myself like her when I was young?” (113)

She honestly says that when she is in Bangladesh, she keeps herself behind the burqa. But she feels that it is not needed to do the same in England when she is working with the white girls. She doesn't want to change herself for the satisfaction of the society.

Mrs. Azad continued. “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 (her infant son). “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.” (114)

Wendy O' Shea Meddour is right to say that 'Brick Lane perpetuates the myth that Muslim Women can become assertive and confident only by becoming more westernized and less Muslim'. Her daughter inherited a lot from her mother and her skirt was shorter than her mother's. She speaks in English. She freely demands money to be spent in the pub. Her behavior doesn't hurt her mother.

One day Nazneen observes a woman on a television screen who wore a skirt. She herself and her man gripped each other. She had sparkly bits around her eyes like tiny sequins glued to her face. Her hair was tied on top of her head with plastic flower. Her chest pumped up and down as if her heart would shoot out. The woman seen on the television and Mrs. Azad are responsible for the future journey of the life of Nazneen.

Mumtaz questions the changing temperament of the God. When she feels that Nazneen would die, she questions Banesa:

'Well, didn't He just send her to us a few minutes ago? Do you think He changes His mind every second?' (13)

When it is decided that Nazneen would be left to her fate, she is of the opinion that the girl should be taken to the hospital for medical treatment.

Mrs. Islam's eyes are small and hard like a bird's. Her white hair looks as if it would break under a comb. She has carpet- slippers. She has been living in London for nearly thirty years, so she knows everything about everybody. Nazneen thought that perhaps Mrs. Islam sleeps with her eyes open and that is how she misses nothing and knows everything. She doesn't keep purdah as her concept of purdah is different.

'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 mixed with all these people, even if they good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs. That's how it is.' (29)

The tattoo lady was one of the neighbours of Nazneen. Every morning and afternoon she sat with big thighs spilling over the sides of her chair. She also drinks. She scratched her arms, her shoulders, the accessible portions of her buttocks. At least two thirds of the flesh of her body is covered in ink. Nazneen thinks that the tattoo's might be flowers, or birds. But they are ugly and they made the tattoo lady uglier, but she doesn't care at all. Nazneen wants to meet the tattoo lady, but she fears to be answered by the strangers with whom she is unable to communicate with as she knows only two words: sorry and thank you.

Jorina is in a trouble. She is working in a garment factory and mixing with all sorts of people - Turkish, English, Jewish, etc. Her son drinks alcohol everyday and her daughter is taken out of school at sixteen and is sent to village to get married. Amina is asking for divorce to her husband because her husband had another wife and that he forgot to mention it for the past eleven years. She has taken money from Mrs. Islam and paying interest on it to her. We have so many women characters in this novel; but at the level of representation, the analysis of these characters seems enough to say that though there are so many obstacles, women are looking for the progress.

Nazneen is a traditional woman for whom there is no better thing other than her husband irrespective of any love or affection for each other. She reads Quran everyday and fears for what will happen of her husband for not reading the Quran, though so she couldn't make her husband to read it. She often thinks of her sister Hasina and worries for her, so use to write letters and wait for the replies. She again and

again use to go through the written script to avoid mistakes; on the contrary, Hasina is careless in her writing and her letters are full of mistakes. It will be interesting to quote one or two lines from the letter from Hasina to Nazneen. She writes;

March 1998

God has heard the prayers! What is the date of confinement? Now husband will put all effort for finding job and God willing continue study also.

It is not like anything the leaves falling. Even coconut tree look hot. I think of Gouripur never so hot in village. Only few trees here shade roads melting. (154)

Her broken English conveys Hasina's growing despair, because of the violent nature of her husband, her failed marriage, her need to work in a factory and her attempts of survival by working as a maid or a prostitute. The case of Nazneen is not so different. She remains at home. She is very loyal to her husband, then comes in contact with Karim and it becomes a turning point in her life. She falls in love with him, but their first sex shows his dominance and her submission. So she again goes away from him. She becomes as strong as her mother wishes to let her fight against her fate. She forgets all her duties towards family and religion which is strictly against the adultery which says;

O Prophet! Strive hard against the Unbelievers and the Hypocrites, and be firm against them. Their abode is Hell – an evil refuge. (Quran : 66.9)

It is surprising to find Nazneen in adultery who is a simple woman reading the Holy Quran regularly, it can be the symbol of her rebel against everything which rejects the basic rights. One more point here needs attention is why Karim is attracted towards Nazneen. He explains that the young Muslim girls are being westernized; wear what they like, all the make-up going on, short skirts and they are going out, getting good jobs, having a laugh. Other religious girls wear the scarf or even the burkha. These girls are nothing but a good wife material. They want to argue. And they always think they know the best because they've been off to all these summer camps for Muslim sisters. And he says that Nazneen is other than those earlier explained girls and is the real thing. He, a religious extremist, wants her only as secondary to him, that is why he. But the question remains why she has ventured of adultery. Her relationship with Karim brings her to the state of independence and she seems firm in her behavior. She doesn't afraid of Mrs. Islam who demands more and more money from her. When Mrs. Islam tries to afraid her by threatening that she will disclose her secrets to her husband, it is Nazneen who said with sound confidence in herself that her husband knows everything and she can't harm her anymore. Moreover, she asks Mrs. Islam to swear by putting hands on the Holy Quran which results in the disappearance of Mrs. Islam from her house.

When Chanu plans to go back to Dhaka, she is firm in her decision that she will not accompany her husband and will continue her stay in London in the absence of her husband only to save her daughters from her own civilization. She wants her daughters to bring up in the same atmosphere. Not only the readers but Karim also here think that now she will marry Karim and live with him. But learning from the very first sex experience with Karim that he will be the dominator and she a dominated one, meaning that Chanu will go and Karim will come; but her status will be the same. So she doesn't marry Karim, instead she remains a single parent. It is Razia with whom she maintains the friendly relations. If she marries Karim, it would be to reject one form of pedagogy and to accept another. This is how she reaches the stage of independence. It would be worthwhile to quote Alistair Cormack who writes:

Nazneen has confronted her oppression within the discourses of gender, race, and religion and won for herself an independent space.

Razia has man – size hands. She wears black shoes. Sari doesn't suit her, so she wears a tracksuit. She looks funny but she is kind hearted. She is very sorry to have second-hand things for her children, that is why she gets angry with her husband who sends money to his brother regularly. Nazneen is a good friend to Razia, so she talks to her about the behavior of her son without thinking of the consequences. She informs Razia that Dr. Azad said that the young men are hooked on drugs and to pay for that they even steal the money of their parents and is grateful, for her husband has kept their curse away from their home. Razia is modern in her outlook as she has no objection if the society criticizes her.

'What about the community?----' 'Will the community feed me? Will it buy footballs for my son? Let the community say what it will. I say this to the community.' (97)

The novel ends with Nazneen, her daughters, and her friend Razia going ice skating, a dream of Nazneen's since she first arrived in Britain. Nazneen protest that she cannot skate in a sari, and Razia closes the book by replying, "This is England. You can do whatever you like." (148) Yildiz KILIC is right to say; Blind adherence to fate is Nazneen's ingrained social and psychological point of departure and signifies her native Muslim roots: 'freewill' is the western 'self-determination' that she achieves at the end of the novel.

To conclude, Monica Ali's Brick Lane focuses on how the women are trying to decolonize

themselves, as they are double minor, to achieve their desired space they reject the social, cultural, religious prohibitions, challenge the male domination and turn their attention to be economically self-dependent. It will be worthwhile to quote Garrett Ziegler:

That is the "liberal city," rather than simply urban life, that allows this transformation is apparent by the fact that Dhaka affords Hasina no such opportunities. It is London which enables Nazneen to discard the laws of religion, slough off decades, or even centuries of gender norms, and end up in control of her own labor power.

It is the condition or the need of the time which requires a person to do his duties like what Shakespeare had said 'man a poor player' to which Nazneen cannot be an exception. There is no choice to Nazneen and she has to participate in the flow of the city, if she wants to move through it; she has to hurl herself in commerce, if she wants to be a citizen of that city and if she doesn't do it and if continues her traditional nature, there is a danger of being thrown out of the flow.

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