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**GLOBALISATION AND THE SENSE OF HOME, GENDER,  
IDENTITY AND RELIGION: A DIASPORIC STUDY OF  
MONICA'S ALI'S BRICK LANE**

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**ABSTRACT**

In an era of globalisation and mass migration, the domain of diasporic study has gained much traction in the global academic arena. Literature has been a mirror to society since time immemorial, and therefore it is no surprise that the echoes of such social, religious and cultural practices can be felt in the literary works. The paper, therefore, is an attempt to analyse the struggles of women in diasporic communities of the 21st in carving an identity for themselves through a detailed study of Monica Ali's novel Brick Lane. It studies the predicament of people who live beyond the boundaries of their homeland as they can neither hold onto their roots nor their status as immigrants. By grappling with their national and self-

identity, they embark on a journey of self-knowledge. The paper focuses on how Nazneen, the protagonist of the novel *Brick Lane*, creates an identity through the challenges she faces in an unfamiliar place with different cultural codes and backgrounds.

**Keywords:** diaspora, identities, immigrants, responsibilities, global, culture.

## Introduction

The term 'diaspora' was initially used by ancient Greeks to refer to large town residents who migrated to assimilate a conquered land. The Babylonians used the term specifically when the Old Testament was translated into Greek to refer to Jews exiled from Judea in 586 BC and Jerusalem in 136 AD. Despite a number of debates on diaspora, the term has achieved popularity only since the 1960s. In the new territory, many diasporic people and communities try to preserve their political, social, and cultural identities and sometimes hold the desire to return to their countries of origin. A variety of other works have been undertaken in this area aside from these critical works. Stuart Hall's "Cultural Diversity and Diaspora" (1990) are some of the main ones, followed with the work of Robin Cohen's "Global Diasporas: An Introduction" (1997), also Brent Hayes' "The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism" (2003), with Vijay Mishra's work "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora" (1996) as well as "Diaspora and the Art of Impossible Mourning" (2001), and R. Radhakrishnan's prior "Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Locations" (1996). Reviewing all these cited articles one admits that banishment is of a kind, nostalgia, recollection, estrangement, and identity crisis is most frequently discussed through diasporic studies.

Today, people willingly leave their countries for fulfilling personal ambitions, but in the early days, migration meant transportation of labourers. People are migrating today with "a part of the total culture in which they participated as long as they stayed at home. Therefore, their adjustment to a distinct social, economic, religious and political environment is not as pathetic as that of early migrants" (Alam, 2018). People were more or less analphabet, and it was the reason behind their

nostalgia. Earlier, it was an entire tribe or a representative part of it that moved away. Migration of various races and communities creates racial, cultural, and linguistic confusion and becomes an obstacle to the formation of national culture.

In the 20th century, there was an increase in movement across geographical boundaries. Migration, particularly to the West, was inflamed by serious household circumstances and the attraction of materialistic enjoyment, peace, and profit. The era of globalization therefore belongs to the migrant. Migration forces the question of culture and identity to be rethought. Multiculturalism is the defining element of the new millennium (Brennan, 2003). First-generation migrants are those who have relocated as adolescents from one nation to another. Second-generation migrants are the families of migrants born in the entry country, who at the time of migration were very young. In second-generation migrants, literature as a manner expresses a sense of belonging to neither the guest nor the host community; a place between two cultures is often noted.

### **Grappling with Identity, Alienation and Nostalgia**

Monica Ali is a Bangladesh-born British writer whose debut novel '*Brick Lane*' was nominated for the 2003 Man Booker Prize award, which spans about 13 years. Ali addresses sensitive issues of Bengali culture and the right of Muslim women to determine their future. *Brick Lane* depicts a young woman's search for identity and purpose in life (Ali, 2004). After her marriage to Chanu Ahmed, Nazneen Ahmed, born in a village in Bangladesh, moves to London at the age of 18. The couple are sandwiched between their initial identity in Bangladesh and their newly found British identity. Nazneen requires her husband's support to embrace her status as a Bangladeshi woman living in a diaspora, but Chanu still professes Bangladesh's conservative ideology of maintaining females under masculine hegemony. As she travels to England following her marriage to Chanu, who is much older than her, the 18-year-old Nazneen leaves everything to fate. She had never met him before as Chanu had been living in Britain for many years. Nazneen feels shackled in the foreign

land by her quixotic husband and Islamic fatalism. She later overcomes her submissiveness, leaves her husband, confronts Islamic traditions, and forges her own identity.

The book's title is taken from Brick Lane, a street that lies between White Chapel Road and Liverpool Street in London. A large number of Bangladeshis who arrived in Britain after 1970 left their cultural and religious mark on this neighbourhood, which was earlier a shelter for Protestants and Jews. The Bangladeshi community bought the synagogue in 1976 and it became an Islamic place of worship for Bengalis. Brick Lane, where Nazneen's life changes, symbolises hope to overcome religious and ethnic boundaries. The novel presents a woman's struggle for identity in a globalised society of the 21st century.

Unlike Chanu, Nazneen was young, an immigrant, and was unaware of the English language and culture. However, over time, she accepts the multicultural London and finds her new identity in the third space of the metropolis. Gradually, she explores the other side of life in London, which allows women to work and live independently (Mortada, 2010). She begins to sew clothes and generates money to be economically independent and sustain her family. Ultimately, in a global metropolitan space, she finds a new global identity and settles in the same place that made her feel alien at times. She rejects Bangladesh's patriarchal social and cultural codes and lives in the metropolis without her husband. In the case of Shahana, she is torn between two different cultures. She does not know if she belongs to the English or Bangladeshi culture and has to choose one of them as she is affected by both linguistic and cultural codes. This cultural conflict leads to confusion about her self-identity.

### **Escaping Patriarchy and Embracing Modernity**

The concept of being independent has positive effects on Nazneen. She tries to gain her identity and independence through the legal work of sewing clothes. She wants to stand on her own feet and lead a free life. Nazneen's quest for identity and freedom develops through three main plot lines: the affair with Karim, the potential return to Bangladesh planned by

Chanu to buy a computer and perhaps, more importantly, the sewing machine of the villainous Mrs. Islam. The denouement of all three stories involves Nazneen's quest for self-identity. Nazneen's ambitious husband, Chanu has a degree from Dhaka University and has shown up to many English classes to enhance his abilities. When Chanu arrived in London, his only vision was to gain respect not only by the Bangladeshi community but also by the British citizens. By beginning a public library, he plans to teach his individuals, but he is unable to complete the project. His dreams never came true, so he gave up his aspirations gradually and works as a taxi driver. Chanu argues to be westernized in the novel, but in a telephone conversation that Nazneen heard soon after their marriage, he defines his young wife as a commodity. Chanu is an embattled figure who lurches desperately between an outdated apparitional Englishness and a self-educated version of himself.

The nature of male Muslim dominance is shown through the psychological and physical oppression which Chanu inflicts on his wife and daughters. His dominant attitude clips Nazneen's wings. Chanu's refusal to let her out alone shows that he values his reputation in the Bangladeshi community more than giving his wife freedom. Chanu questions Nazneen's need for mental and physical changes and considers absurd her desire to learn English and ice skating. Windows serve as Nazneen's only view of the world outside her flat. The windows heighten Nazneen's isolation within the four-walled claustrophobic flat she shares with her husband. In sharp contrast, Nazneen is subdued, almost dull in her role as the obedient housewife and mother. Chanu does not listen to Nazneen or consider her opinions and desires to be as important as his own. It is the man, the husband, the brother or the father, who represents and gives her a voice but not an opinion. She is Chanu's uncomplaining, passive, and subservient audience. He changes his views, according to his shortcomings and fears. After his numerous professional failures, Chanu finally concentrates on returning to Dhaka with his family.

There are other female characters in the novel, who have powerful personalities. The daughter of Nazneen, Shahana, was born in England and

raised. She has never been to Bangladesh, and in many respects she feels British. However, being the daughter of a Bangladeshi immigrant family, Shahana faces difficulties in adapting to the predominantly white British society. She feels conflicted and confused about people labelling her as an immigrant. She is caught between the Bangladeshi culture of her parents, and the English culture she's growing up in. She learns English at school, but at home her dad prevents her from using the language. Her family background embarrasses Shahana and embraces Western customs. She rebels against her father's traditions by getting a tattoo, piercing, wearing brief dresses, disliking food from Bangladesh, and disobeying the rigid guidelines of her father. She is scared to return to Bangladesh and become a victim like her mother.

Meanwhile, Nazneen's friend Razia represents modernity, feminism, and westernisation. We might say that, she is one of those tragic, intelligent and colourful personalities. What other people think about her, she doesn't care and adopts the western culture. She wears modern clothes though Bangladeshis keep gossiping about her becoming too English. She also tells Nazneen about England's positive sides. She shares her experiences and tells her to be friendly and polite with English people, but not to interfere with their personal lives.

### **A Paradigm Shift in the Understanding of Diaspora**

In the era of technological development, where travel is created and distances are decreased, the word diaspora has lost its initial connotation. Diasporic literature is born from a curious connection to their homelands, traditions, cultures, and languages. According to Salman Rushdie, migrants come from the native land and migrants run from pillar to post across moment, memory and history limits, carrying with them the vision and dream of returning to their country as and when migrants like and find fit to return. Stuart Hall in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1994) says that it is an obvious reality that the migrants' dreams are pointless and it would not be feasible to return to the country. The willingness to belong to the new home counteracts the homeland's search, so that the migrant

stays an edge creature, the peripheral person. If we classify them as diasporas, we do so because most, if not all, of the following characteristics, are shared (Safran, 2007):

1. They or their ancestors have been dispersed in one or more incidental or foreign locality from a specific original "center."
2. In their communal organisations, their social, religious, financial and political links with the nation are significantly articulated.
3. So they also retain their original country's vision, or myth, collective memory often enough, their physical position, history, and accomplishments, and pain.
4. They share a common "individual's hood" notion in other countries, not just with home nation, but with ethnic kin.
5. Then they really think they should dedicate themselves jointly to sustaining or rebuilding their nation of origin and its protection and growth.

### **Resolving Identity Crisis and Cultural Conflict**

Traditionally, identity is determined based on culture, language, and nationality as covered by Stuart Hall in his study *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1994). He claims that "social identity" is formed in conjunction with one shared culture at first place, a kind of universal true self hidden inside the many other, shallower or externally created "selves" shared by historical and ancient people. In terms of this definition, our ethnic identities embody the everyday historic experiences and universal identity codes that provide us with solid, unchanging and consistent frames of reference and meaning as 'one individuals under the evolving distinctions and vicissitudes of our cultural history.

Even though there has been a flux in the postmodern world, in terms of individual and collective regions, religions, cultures and languages, people are always identified. Globalisation has transformed people's lives, provided an opportunity for a multicultural society to be

adopted and rejected (Chambers, 2005). Because of the effect of globalisation, the opportunity for acculturation has been intensified. In the novel, while women are allowed to live in England, their lives are far from England because they are supposed to be the women who live within the boundaries set when they were brought from Bangladesh. The families that settled in this neighbourhood of London live within the English community but bound by their Bangladeshi culture and customs. The patriarchal, malignant society still applies and justifies Bangladesh's rules of life. However, the novel's protagonist, Nazneen, breaks free from her barriers and boundaries. She rejects her husband's offer to return to Bangladesh, choose to remain in London with her two daughters and start a fresh and independent life. She searches for a new identity while watching television and ice skating, which symbolises life in an iceberg. Through the practice of self-concept, she breaks the boundaries of Brick Lane, which signified the stereotypical and prejudiced Bangladeshi patriarchal society in London.

Self-concept is an internal model that defines self-regulation by using self-assessments. It depends on perceptions of oneself, how others perceive them, and encapsulate the answer to 'Who am I?' This requires one's identity-schemes and deals with the notion of self-esteem, social selves followed with self-knowledge to form the whole body. This includes the past, current and future selves, in which future selves represent thoughts about what one might become, want to become, or to become. It is a trust collection that encompasses factors including academic achievement, sexual identity, gender identity, and racial identity.

In this analysis cultural adaptability is noted as a form of life assessed by an individual's open mindedness. At the individual and collective stage, the notion of accepting, denying and adopting the other community in a multicultural global environment is self-contradictory (Basi, 2009). There are various aspects of acculturation through which an individual adopts a particular culture. The response to cross-cultural encounters differs from person to person. This study has analysed the different culturally adaptive responses of Nazneen and Chanu. Although



both of them were immigrants of the first generation, their cultural interaction is quite different. From this study, we have noticed that though Chanu is a first-generation English-educated man with a job, he faces several challenges in London. He finally has to leave London and return to Bangladesh.

## Conclusion

It was observed in the study that cross-cultural interaction and the emergence of the new idea of acculturation, adaptation, and rejection of cross-cultural identity are entirely different. Chanu leaves Britain and returns to Bangladesh, his native country. He feels insecure and cross-cultural conflict creates in him a fear of losing his cultural and linguistic identity. Nazneen, however, wants to remain in Britain. Monica Ali has appealingly portrayed various characters caught in two worlds: from their initial country to the new cultural system. Ali portrays two genders and two generations the same as what Rudyard Kipling describes as "East is East and West is West, and the two will never come together." Monica Ali means being successful in showing that contrasting philosophies and cultures will stay on the frontier in which the earth (different generations) as well as the heavens (conflicting ideologies) will never converge and coexist (Chatrath, 2015). This novel is also a triumph of gender equality to some degree that all male protagonists struggle to establish their respective social and cultural identities, and finally give up, conceding surrender. All the female characters, though, come out in flying colours and with utter intellect, determination, and gumption achieve their personalities. Indeed, like the portrayal shown in *Emma* by Jane Austen or *Tess* by Hardy, Nazneen Ahmed will always hold a recognizable and significant place in our hearts and minds. However, Monica Ali is a genuine feminist advocate, and this novel has undeniably taken her talent to the fore as one of the best post-colonial women authors. The novel *Brick Lane* and the character Nazneen Ahmed will certainly appear to be 'consciousness sirens' for all 21st era diasporic females seeking to build their identities in a social test setting. The personality of Nazneen will encourage them to

face patriarchal oppression within gender, ethnicity, and religion to emerge as self-confident, autonomous females.

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