



Inner Turmoil, Existential Crisis and Ultimate Transformation: A Study of the Major Characters in Monica Ali's Brick Lane

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Abstract

This paper is a study of the inner turmoil, existential crisis and ultimate transformation of the major characters in Monica Ali's celebrated novel *The Brick Lane* (2003). The study delves into the psyche of the two male characters: Chanu and Karim, and three female characters: Nazneen, Hasina and Razia. These characters are Bangladeshi migrants living in the Tower Hamlets, a suburb of London. More precisely, this study attempts to understand the circumstances that made these female characters get rid of their patriarchal mindset. The thrust of this study is to trace the evolution of the female characters from a subdued and submissive housewife to an empowered individual. The study brings home the argument that men in the novel are detached and disillusioned whereas the women assimilate and carve a space for themselves. The paper also touches upon the concept of the 'Go Home Syndrome' of the migrants.

Key Words : turmoil, existential crisis, transformation, submissive, empowered

Introduction

Based on the immigrant experiences of Bangladeshi Muslim men and women, Monica Ali's celebrated novel *Bick Lane* (2003) portrays inner turmoil, existential crisis and ultimate transformation of the characters like Chanu, Karim, Nazneen, Hasina and Razia. After getting married, Nazneen, an eighteen-year-old bride, from a remote village of Bangladesh, moves to London with her husband Chanu, and begins living in a tiny flat of Tower Hamlets in London. Ali's *Brick Lane* is the narrative of a woman struggling for existence in an alien society. She struggles hard in understanding the ways of the western society, and in due course, acquires strength and comes out from the trap of being a subdued and submissive housewife, to that of an empowered individual. Bit by bit, Nazneen sheds the inhibition of having a patriarchal mindset and begins charting the course of her own destiny.

The entire narrative revolves around Nazneen. Nevertheless, the other characters like Chanu, Karim, Hasina and Razia also play a significant role in shaping the character growth of Nazneen. All these characters, at some points in the novel, are vulnerable and face the existential crisis. However, with guts and determination, women in the novel carved their own space and emerged as confident individuals ready to face the travails of life. In a nutshell, Monika Ali's *Brick Lane* is the story of the ultimate transformation and emancipation of a demure village girl.

Male Characters

There are two important male characters in Monika Ali's *Brick Lane*. They are: Chanu and Karim. Chanu is the husband of Nazneen and Karim is her secret lover. Both Chanu and Karim have spent a long time in London, yet they never felt at home in their adopted land. Like all other migrants, claims Dr Azad, a friend of Chanu, they suffer from "a disease that afflicts the migrants. I call it Go Home Syndrome." (Ali, *Brick Lane*, P.32). The migrants always think of their

native place, native culture and a way of life they have left behind. “Their bodies are here but their hearts are back there.” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.32) However, when the crisis came in the form of 9/11, both Chanu and Karim, took it as an opportunity and returned to their fold.

Chanu

Chanu, a migrant, lives in a London suburb and keeps struggling with a hope to find a better job and a better quality of life. Chanu married an 18-year-old young Nazneen, a village girl, and brought her to London. Chanu is a typical Victorian patriarch who believed that women have a duty towards their husband and children. They should keep themselves busy in cooking, cleaning and rearing their children. Chanu has academic degrees from Bangladesh and has also earned some minor degrees from Britain. However, all went in vain, as he never got a satisfactory job in London. Chanu thought that his promotion was stalled because of the white man's discrimination against the migrants. Finally, Chanu lost his job, and became a Taxi Driver, which he almost hated. Chanu laments, “so much hard work, so little reward.” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.34)

Deep in his heart, Chanu always wanted to go to Dhaka. The catastrophic event of 9/11 gave him the long-cherished opportunity, and when it happened, Chanu cried, “it's time to go.” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.369). He left his adopted land and went to Bangladesh. Chanu never considered London his homeland. Dr Azad whom Chanu considers his friend in London, says that a migrant always suffers from a mental disease called “Going Home Syndrome” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.32). A migrant is, often, not bothered to adapt and assimilate with the local culture. Chanu believes in the statement that “the pull of the land is stronger than the pull of the blood.” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.32)

Karim

Karim is the second-generation Bangladeshi migrant in London. He speaks English confidently, but when he speaks Bengali, he stammers. It was destiny that brought Karim to the doorstep of Nazneen who had started working as a seamstress. Karim used to collect clothes that Nazneen stitched. Karim gave her the confidence she was craving for. He gave voice to her lips whereas Chanu, her husband, always discouraged her to go out and do something on her own. Karim said to Nazneen “You have got to stand your ground” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.260) Karim took Nazneen to attend the meetings of Bengal Tiger, a radical party he had launched to protect the interest of the Bangladeshi migrants.

Right from their first meeting, Karim was able to attract Nazneen's attention with whom, eventually, he had several intense sexual sessions. However, in the aftermath of 9/11, the radical Karim felt threatened. He started wearing “Panjabi-Pyjama and a skull cap.” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.376) Karim wanted Nazneen to get married with him and go to Bangladesh. When Nazneen refused to follow the dictates of Karim, he became disillusioned and eventually he disappeared. Karim couldn't face the challenges brought by the new world order in the aftermath of 9/11.

Female Characters

The entire narrative revolves around the female characters in *Brick Lane*. These female characters appear vulnerable in the beginning, but, at the end, they are emancipated. Defining the immigrant experiences through the obstacles and conflicts they encounter” (Maslin, 2003) they transform themselves and get ready to stand on their own feet. At the end, they have taken the reigns of their life in their own hands.

In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, women were first dependent on their parents and later they became dependent on their husbands. They were vulnerable and suffered from existential crisis. Fate played a significant role in their life. Nevertheless, they never thought of going back to their native land. Whenever Nazneen thought about their homeland back in Bangladesh, she thought about inconvenience. (Ali, Brick Lane, P.77)

They wanted to stay in London where they felt freedom from the shackles of third world patriarchy. Circumstances paved a path for them; they came out from the trap of patriarchy and stood on their own feet. The transformation of their mindset began during their stay in the Tower Hamlets. In course of time, they crossed the passage from the state of being to the state of becoming. These women represent a successful cultural fusion. Ali's novel is all about an integration of the female characters into the British society. (Upstone, 2011, P.182)

Nazneen

Nazneen is the lead character in Monica Ali's celebrated novel *Brick Lane*. She was born and brought up in a remote village of Bangladesh. Her father arranged her marriage to Chanu, an elderly man settled in London. She reached London at the age of eighteen and found herself facing the challenges of living in an alien society. Her main job was

cooking, cleaning and rearing her children. Living with her husband, and spending her time in a monotonous routine, Nazneen felt that her life was “without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination.” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.56). It was when her husband lost his job, she began working as a seamstress to support the family expenses.

Right from her birth, Nazneen was taught by her mother to believe in fate. Her identity was shaped by the established traditional norms. As per the patriarchal teachings, submissiveness is the prime quality of a woman's identity. (Vasundhara, 2020). However, her marriage, and subsequent migration to London, and the death of her first-born child, acts as a catalyst that enables her to discover herself. Initially she suffered from a lot of inner turmoil and existential crisis, but, the circumstances she encountered brought a drastic change in her attitude towards life.

Living with her patriarchal husband, her inability to speak English and her courage to venture alone into the streets of London, enhances Nazneen's independent spirit and encourages her to cross the limits of familiar boundary. Circumstances forced Nazneen to introspect and break the shackles of life scripted by the patriarchal set up. She started exploring the world outside. When she interacted with a stranger in English and was understood, her self-esteem was raised.” (Vasundhara, 2020). Ali says, “it was very little, but it was something,” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.61) Eventually, a subdued village girl, Nazneen, transforms and takes the reign of her life into her own hands and begins writing her own destiny by making her own choices. (Vasundhara, 2020).

It was when Nazneen begins working as a seamstress, she encounters Karim, a young man, who brings clothes for her to stitch. Right from the first meeting, Nazneen was attracted towards Karim. And when the time came, without any hesitation, she submitted herself to him. On a background of racial conflict and tension, Nazneen and Karim embark on a love affair that forces Nazneen finally to take control of her fate.” (prisonreadinggroups.com) The uninhibited sexual experience liberated her. She became confident in dealing with her day-to-day chores. During her session with Karim, “a thought crept into her mind that the power was inside her, and she was its creator.” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.300) Karim's entry into her life transformed her outlook. Karim was a dominant force, virile and demanding. During the intense sexual act with Karim Nazneen discovered a new power within her and started looking at the challenges of life in a different manner.

The frequent sexual encounter with Karim empowered Nazneen, and she started defying the dictates of her husband. Later when Chanu decided to go back to Bangladesh, Nazneen categorically denied and said that she will stay with her children in London only and would not go to Bangladesh. She also rejected Karim's proposal and said that she wouldn't get married with him. The process of transformation that had started with the death of her son Raquib, completed when she gathered courage to refuse both, her husband as well as her lover, and decided to live an independent life. A passive and obedient housewife, in course of time, evolved and discovered that “This is England, You can do whatever you like.” (Brick Lane, P.492). It is in this context that Nazneen's eventual hopefulness is so significant; it is she, and not her lover Karim, or patriarch such as her husband Chanu, who finds the possibility of happiness in Britain. (Upstone, 2012, P.176)

Hasina

Hasina is the younger sister of Nazneen. During their childhood, Nazneen and Hasina, both, lived a pristine life in a remote village of Bangladesh. Hasina was extremely beautiful and had “heart shaped face, pomegranate pink lips, and liquid eyes.” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.51) Hasina was always a free-spirited girl. She didn't want to live a life scripted by others. She fell in love “with the nephew of the sawmill owner” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.16) and eloped with him to Dhaka where she was repeatedly beaten and abused and later betrayed by her lover. Nazneen knew that “Hasina was in danger, a beautiful young girl, alone in Dhaka.” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.69) Hasina showed her courage and fortitude to come out from the trap of an abusive relationship. She was even raped in the streets of Dhaka. She started working in the garment factory and eventually became a prostitute.

Nazneen always kept thinking about Hasina, “A woman on her own in the city, without a husband, without family, without friends and without protection.” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.58) Hasina's self-esteem was increasingly crushed, and circumstances forced her into the flesh trade, yet, she remains resolved to the choices of her life. (Vasundhara, 2020). Nazneen, sometimes, felt depressed, “Only God knew when she would see her again.” (Ali, Brick Lane, P. 22) Hasina, frequently, wrote letters to Nazneen. Hasina's letters written to Nazneen, serve manifold purposes. The letters strengthen a bond between the two sisters. Moreover, the letters disseminate information about the changing socio- political situations of Bangladesh. In one of her letters, Hasina writes that “there is no end of corruption in Bangladesh” (Ali, Brick Lane, 148). Hasina writes, “University is also close down. All students hold protest. They are rallying for right to cheat.” (Ali, Brick Lane, P.148)

Circumstances transformed Hasina into a tough woman. Hasina's decision to come out from the trap of abusive relationship and to start working in a garment factory indicates her struggle for freedom. First, she is capable enough to

take a decision for her life, and second, she begins working to attain economic independence in her life. Like Hasina, Nazneen also wanted to ‘fall in love’ (Ali, *Brick Lane*, P.40) and takes the reins of life in her own hands. Despite the ordeals Hasina faced in her life she didn’t give up. She survived and kept her spirits high. She remained ‘unbroken.’ (Ali, *Brick Lane*, P. 485) The constant abuse and her subsequent struggle deepened her resolve to fight and survive. Hasina remains strong and firm against the impediments of life. The odds of life couldn’t deter her. Hasina’s bold steps and free spirit remained a source of inspiration for Nazneen.

Razia Iqbal

Nazneen's neighbour and best friend, Razia Iqbal, though looked funny, was “a kind-hearted woman.” (Ali, *Brick Lane*, P.47) Razia has been a source of great support and inspiration for Nazneen. Razia is the only person whom Nazneen considers her friend. “Nazneen enjoyed seeing Razia most.” (Ali, *Brick Lane*, P.47) When Nazneen didn’t receive Hasina’s letters and felt desperate, “Razia was a good distraction”. (Ali, *Brick Lane*, P.48).

A mother of two growing kids, Razia wore Union Jack sweatshirt, and went to school to learn English, yet, it was” the sari that looked strange on her.” (Ali, *Brick Lane*, P.27) After the death of her abusive husband, Razia didn’t go long for mourning, and never thought about going back home.” (Ali, *Brick Lane*, P.427) Rather she gathered herself, and started working as a freelance seamstress. For Razia, her children were her priority. Later, with lots of courage and fortitude Razia helps her son Tariq get rid of his addiction.

Razia has undergone through a lot in her life. After the death of her husband, and her son Tariq falling into the trap of drug addiction, Razia, suffered a lot of inner turmoil and existential crisis. Though lonely and devastated, Razia didn’t give up. She never stopped arranging medical treatment for her son, and eventually, she won against all the odds. With her own die-hard attitude Razia was able to restore normalcy in her life.

In course of time, a strong bond emerged between Nazneen and Razia. Nazneen reveals, “you are the only friend I have”. Razia looked at her, “You don’t have to tell me.” They walked together in silence. (Ali, *Brick Lane*, P.357). Razia is a strong and independent woman. “With her British Passport and Union Jack Sweatshirt” (Ali, *Brick Lane*, P.428) Razia took the responsibility of rearing her children, and remained a constant support to Nazneen. She always encouraged Nazneen to do something on her own. Razia convinced Nazneen that staying in London is better than staying in their own country. (Ali, *Brick Lane*, P 72)

Conclusion

The male characters in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* are static, disillusioned and detached. They suffer from existential crisis. They shrink in their shell and remain in search of their comfort zone. They always think of going back to their native place where they have spent their formative years. This is the same thing they try to plant in the minds of their women and children. Chanu and Karim both have been living in London for a long time, yet in their mind, they never left their native place. In contrast, the female characters in the narrative, namely, Nazneen, Hasina and Razia are vibrant and dynamic. They are forward looking. They are willing to assimilate, and consequently, they evolve and transform themselves.

This study delves deep into the psyche of the migrants and specifically the female characters portrayed in the novel. “Brick Lane is Ali's first and most celebrated novel and is so far the only narrative which has been devoted entirely to the Asian migration experience in Britain.” (Pereira, 2012) All the three women suffered inner turmoil and existential crisis, yet they survived and transformed. The paper affirms female solidarity, the support of females to one another and how the female network really uplifts the spirits of one another. Nazneen’s character is shaped not only by her husband and her lover, but by the letters written to her by Hasina, and by the constant support she received from Razia. Initially, all the three women are passive and dependent upon their men, but, once they became free from their men, they didn’t feel lonely and forlorn. They have renounced their menfolk, “in favour of a solid, truthful and supportive female communion.” (Sciendo). Finally, they reinvented themselves and got themselves transformed.

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