

Realization of Sustainability: A Diasporic Reading of Monica Ali's Brick Lane

Anitha B

Assistant Professor of English, Department of English(Aided), Nirmala College for Women (Autonomous), Red Fields, Coimbatore – 641 018, India

Abstract

The paper entitled “Realization of Sustainability: A Diasporic Reading of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*” exemplifies the effects and responses of the female protagonist who becomes a victim of the traumatic disputes of migration and varied issues of an individual's denuncements. In juxtaposition, exploration of individuals' strength in varied perspective of practical progress and the consequences of geographical displacements are expressed. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* stands unique in the paradigm of women writers, where the focus is mostly on the lives of Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlet, the eastern suburb of London. The milieu of diasporic discernment causes the protagonist to rely on her experiences of the past which inevitably opens a new phase of transformation which enables her to acquire a new outlook of life, develops her personal growth through felt experiences and her encounters with social, cultural and economic oppressions. The paper tends to consider closely on the psychological and identical evolution of the female protagonist in adapting with a 'new land', expressing the journey of life from the clutches of dependency to a total dominion of self-reliant individual.

KEYWORDS : Diaspora, self-reliant, displacement, sustainability

Realization of Sustainability: A Diasporic Reading of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

To conceptualize the diaspora in the universal context, it represents an identical entity of the geographical displacement, in other words, shifting one's root or journey beyond the bounds knowing varied civilizations has become a normal occurrence. Several studies have emerged in connection with diasporic studies which extensively relate to transnational immigration, boundary crossing, multiple identities, diverse nationalities, citizenship in twofold and many more disputes and dilemma faced by the expatriates or exiled. Today, diaspora with multiple complexities has ushered its prominence globally understanding the migrant societal problems. Diaspora invokes a way of living realizing the vicissitudes especially the geographic displacement, either voluntary or forced, brings about heightened processes of negotiation between the past, the present and the future. Khachig Toloyan expresses Diaspora as,

emblems of transnationalism because they embody the question of borders'. Whereas the nation state is imagined in terms of bounded stability as 'a land, a territory a place that functions as the site of homogeneity, equilibrium, integration...[and] domestic tranquility' – diasporas are recognized as the 'others' of the nation-state'. (7)

Effectively, diaspora creates a space for living, facilitating with new environs and mirroring with their dialogue of different notions of individual subjectivity and group representation, as well as global and local belonging. These processes contribute

pivotal to the identity development of diasporic people, and this plays out continually as is evident in the choices diasporic people make about the way they live.

The dynamics of diaspora is felt with multiple forces based on the ethnicities or nationalities into various kinds such as Jewish, Greek, Armenian, African, Chinese, Indian, etc. People who moved from the South Asian regions such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives were termed as South Asian diaspora. Diasporic writing mostly becomes a response to the lost homes and to issues such as dislocation, nostalgia, discrimination, survival, cultural change and identity.

A sense of individual identity, feeling for the lost home, detachment from the cultural bounds and mostly associated with the diasporic people. Though the society forfeits with external problems like discrimination and identity crisis, it is their internal crisis like alienation and tender feelings of their inner problems cause more suffering to them. The intensity of the diasporic community is especially faced with the predicament of identical issues. Hence, defining one's identity is a central question for every individual, especially in alien or unfavourable circumstances.

The origin of the Indian Diaspora has always been the regional social structures of the emigrants and migrants. It is the shared cultural heritage of Indians which lays the foundation for the Indian Diaspora. Writers of Indian diaspora often deal with narrative of people moving out of their homes—primarily to the Great West. An increasing number of Indian writers of the diaspora have won high recognition for their writings and made a place for them on the literary map of the world. Some names that stand out are - V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, M.G. Vassanji, Shani Mootoo, Vikram Chandra, David Dabydeen, Rohinton Mistry, Hanif Kureishi, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth. Among these are writers who were born and brought up in India and migrated subsequently, those who were born in the US or UK and brought up by their migrant parents as well as those who migrated from other continents to US, Canada and UK but whose parents are of Indian origin. Their writings contribute to the domain of literature paralleling with diasporic experiences ultimately enriching the variegated canvas of Indian diasporic writings.

Fiction by Indian women writers constitutes a major segment of contemporary Indian diaspora literature. Bharati Mukherjee, Bharati Kirchner, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anjana Appachana, Kiran Desai, Sujata Massey, Indira Ganeshan and Jhumpa Lahiri are some of them.

These writers have made their homeland memorable and popular by writing their experiences as expatriates. The women writers present the two colorful worlds of cultures.

Among the diasporic writers, Monica Ali's novels are examined as the literary product of a female novelist from an ethnically diverse background whose writing presents the experiences of migration that has for women. In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali redeems this female invisibility by creating a novel which primarily revolves around the plight of the female migrant, either at an intra-national –Hasina– or inter-national level –Nazneen–, thereby providing a counterpoint to predominant male-centered accounts of migration. The immigrant narratives not only explore diasporic identity, but they also vindicate a place in society for diasporic communities and a space within the nation.

Brick Lane (2003) is Monica Ali's first and successful novel. It was shortlisted for the Man Booker prize in the year of its publication and Ali was included in the Granta list of "Twenty Best Young British Novelists". *Brick Lane* won the 2003 W.H Smith People's Choice Award. The book received both praise and condemnation from critics upon its arrival. Despite the novel's apparent message of female empowerment in immigrant conditions, the critical reception following *Brick Lane*'s 2003 release was mixed, with many reviewers seeing it as reinforcing stereotypes of Bangladeshi immigrants.

Reading *Brick Lane* as a Female Diaspora reveals how the author applies and adapts many of the genres' traditional features and adds new dimensions to them. Analyzing the aspects of the idea of Diaspora, the concept of identity as well as the impact of race, gender, and class on an individual's subject formation it can be argued that in *Brick Lane* the main characteristic of the genre consists in the depiction of a characters' identity formation within a particular social context. By tracing Nazneen's unexpected progress towards integration into the British culture and community, Nazneen's story represents a celebration of individual resourcefulness, and can therefore be seen as a narrative of development. *Brick Lane*'s intensive focus on Nazneen's self-actualization, and eventual acceptance of life in Britain, associates it with this traditional Western genre, particularly as it traces Nazneen's story from her early childhood onwards.

Monica Ali's evocative tale of diasporic migration concentrates on the growing process of Nazneen and her personal development from a state of mute acceptance of fate, to tentative but irrevocable, individual agency. This change in the protagonist is to some extent marked by the change of location. Moreover, since the novel deals with the situation of an immigrant woman from an Asian background her class, gender and race mark her relation to space in a particular way. The novel also traces topics and issues that refer to the protagonist's most personal feelings, emotions, ideas and doubts.

The novel deals, in this respect, with the diasporic journey of Nazneen. *Brick Lane* traces the story of its protagonist Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman from her birth in rural Bangladesh to London's Tower Hamlets. Nazneen undergoes a compulsory diasporic experience when she is forced to come to England because of an arranged marriage. Her younger sister, Hasina, has run away to make a love-marriage without her father's permission, so Nazneen's father finds her a husband in England and sends her away. Nazneen is nineteen and Chanu is forty when they marry. In England Nazneen experiences many problems. First she does not know the language; secondly, the Bangladeshi community in *Brick Lane* is very strict, so she is initially not allowed to go out alone. She is very homesick, and longs for her village. She also misses her sister deeply, and is distressed when Hasina writes to tell her that she has run away from her abusive husband, and is struggling to survive alone in Dhaka.

Nazneen feels very isolated, partly because of her alienation from her environment leads her to resist engaging with others, and partly because of Chanu's inability to empathize with her. She loses her first baby, Raqib, but then gives birth to two girls, Shahana and Bibi. While raising her children she learns English from them. She tries to mitigate her sorrows with her daughters.

However, her life changes when she falls in love with a young British-born Bangladeshi, Karim, and has an affair with him. For the first time in her life she feels that someone

cares for her. It makes her excited but at the same time she feels guilty because she is committing a sin. Nazneen gradually develops an independent sense of self. Nazneen falls in bad condition so many times, but her inner strength fights against her fate which gradually develops. Eventually, Nazneen builds a life for herself by rejecting both Chanu and Karim; she chooses not to return to Bangladesh with Chanu, and also refuses to marry Karim; she chooses to remain in London with her daughters, where she establishes a clothing business with Razia and other Bangladeshi women.

The novel begins with Nazneen's birth in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), but within the first five pages of the text, she is in London. The confined spaces to which the novel restricts itself is indexed in the title even before the narrative opens. The title 'Brick Lane' describes the extent of her world and an accidental venture outside leaves Nazneen with a sense of exhilaration and accomplishment. Ali describes bricks several times in her book. Bricks cannot easily be moved, bricks are obstacles. Nazneen's sister Hasina says she "hate[s] bricks" (169). When water comes through the brick wall in her flat, it represents something that cannot be stopped, just like fate. When Nazneen's son is ill and they are at the hospital, Nazneen starts thinking about brick tombs. In relation to this, bricks are barriers as well. The brick tombs may represent her son's death and the difficulties and hindrances in her life the demise will cause. But a woman saying she "can break bricks with [her] gums" is also described (151), showing on a symbolic level that bricks can be conquered after all.

Brick Lane is an answer to the perennial question of how the individual can remain both constant and change. As a woman, Nazneen's metamorphosis supposes possibilities of new cultural affiliations and therefore new opportunities, which takes place in cross-breeding of cultures involving the rejection of past and assimilation of new values. In *Brick Lane*, Ali shapes a female character who transgresses boundaries fixed on her by her gender, culture, caste and economic status. The focus roots specifically on how this south Asian female protagonist shapes her identity in diasporic conditions. Nazneen is determined by strategies of resistance, escaping from traditional space, using sexuality in order to move beyond restrictions imposed on her and thus renegotiating the space in which she actually resides. The gendered space underlines the idea of home which remains problematic. As Bedjaoui mentions, "the conflation of home, as both security and prison, evokes therefore one's limited identity (3).

Through the reading of this novel one can understand that the diasporic community gets both positive and negative images from the settled society. In the initial stages of their settlement almost everything seems to be problematic and the diasporic individuals only get a negative view of the society. But later they derive enough experience to face the sufferings in a bold way and tend to look at the better economic and global opportunities for their children.

Ali's novel suggests that women migrants from conservative countries can adapt to and benefit from the host culture more easily without the pressures associated with their gendered, marital roles. The novel is particularly of interest as an examination of the double bind that female migrants face, treated as alien by their host nation and as commodities by the men in their own communities. In the end Nazneen finds a way to deal with both the aspects: she gets over her white people and manages to convince Chanu to return to Bangladesh on his own. Nazneen stays in London, starts a business with her friends and leads a self-determined life.

Thus, *Brick Lane* chronicles Nazneen's journey from a dominated, subdued teenager to a gradual metamorphosis into a hesitant, independent woman beyond her stifling, bleak and cluttered flat on Brick Lane and records how she transgresses the boundaries set in and by different spaces. It brings out Nazneen's story as a celebration of individual resourcefulness focusing on her self-actualization and her eventual acceptance of life in Britain.

References:

Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. Great Britain: Black Swan, 2004. Print.

Bauman, Martin. "Diaspora: Genealogies of Semantics and Transcultural Comparison". *NUMEN*. 47.3 (2000): 313-337. Print.

Bedjaoui, Fewzia. "Trying to Belong: Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*". Web. April 2015.

Tololyan, Khachig. —The Nation-State and Its Others: In Lieu of a Preface, In *Diaspora* Vol.1, No.1, 1991. pp.3-7