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MIGRATION, IDENTITY CRISIS AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN MONICA ALI'S  
*BRICK LANE*

AKSHAY YARDI<sup>1</sup>, Dr. P. S. SUBRAHMANYA BHAT<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of PG Studies and Research in English  
Karnataka State Akkamahadevi Women's University, Vijayapura

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English, Karnatak College, Dharwad



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ABSTRACT

With migration, people undergo transformation and re-formation of their culture, values, lifestyles and language. While a few efficient persons succeed in migration but for a few individuals, migration becomes a disappointing nightmare. Migration could confuse people in their values, culture and identities. Some individuals overcome these crises by adapting to the new environment while others fail to create a place for themselves in the new world. Monica Ali's famous novel *Brick Lane* (2003) narrates the struggles of Bangladeshi immigrants who settle in the cosmopolitan city of London. It is about the impact of migration on their identities. On the one side, we see an identity crisis in the case of Chanu who returns to his native country as a failure in England; and on the other, we see the formation of a hybrid and powerful identity in the case of Nazneen who can adapt herself to the new conditions in the cosmopolitan London. Some characters in the novel shape-up their lives in radical ways to protect their religious identity in a foreign land. The present paper shall focus on all the important characters in the novel and on how their identities are reshaped by the cosmopolitan environment of London.

**Keywords:** Migration, hybridity, culture, subculture, religion, identity, re-formation, going-back-home, alienation, uprootedness, diaspora

Migration is not simply the physical displacement of people. It involves several complex human problems such as trauma, the pain of nostalgia, uprootedness, alienation, inferiority, ethnic discrimination, identity crisis and cultural transformation. There could be various reasons for migration, although the most important reason is economic. In the post-world War period, several people from the previous colonies migrated to the cosmopolitan urban centres of the early colonizer countries of Europe. Several Bangladeshi Muslims migrated and settled in England for better livelihood. A. Nejat Tongur (2013) in his article<sup>2</sup> writes, "Political instability, widespread poverty, lack of resources, unemployment, natural disasters and economic problems in the country accelerated the emigration to Britain which was seen as a land of opportunities." (p.251). Once in England, most of them faced issues such as unemployment, poverty and identity crisis as they were not skilled or educated to meet the standards of the Western world. As a result, they were employed in low-paying jobs and their living standards went down. Thus, for several immigrants, migration was not a romantic holiday but a disappointing nightmare. To live in the Christian-dominated white society of England, was difficult for

Bangladeshi Muslims, owing to religious and racial discrimination. Thus, migration posed a threat to their identity in the Western world. However, some immigrants learnt to adapt themselves to the multicultural atmosphere of London and other English cities and created a new identity for themselves in the Western country.

*Brick Lane* (2003) is a famous novel written by Monica Ali, a Bangladeshi-British diasporic writer. As an ethnic outsider in England, she writes of the struggles and challenges of Bangladeshi immigrants in the Christian-dominated White London society. The novel centres around a Bangladeshi immigrant family in search of their existence in London. By narrating the life and struggles of Chanu and his wife Nazneen, she reflects upon the lifestyle, cultural crisis, isolation, alienation and religious crisis experienced by Bangladeshi refugees in England. Chanu, an educated man from Bangladesh fails to create his identity in London due to his reservations about British society. He says, speaking about racism among the British people, "And you see, to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan." (Ali, 28). Feeling uprooted from his traditions, he lives a life of insecurity and discomfort in London. Affected by failure and the 'going-back-home' syndrome, Chanu returns to Bangladesh to live in the 'comfort zone' of his motherland. His wife Nazneen, on the other hand, makes slow and steady progress in life and creates an identity for herself in London by adapting to the Western culture. The story of Nazneen's transformation from a naïve, young housewife into a smart and confident independent woman in London is the central focus of the novel. Dr Rafia Rahman<sup>3</sup> (2021) writes of the character of Nazneen:

Nazneen, unlike her husband, recognizes the importance of teamwork, integration and incorporation. Incorporation authorizes Nazneen to claim she possesses an independent personality and self-reliance, while collaboration pressures her to achieve reciprocal compromise and balance with their ambivalence and contradiction... (p.974)

Migration would mostly result in cultural conflict, especially for first-generation immigrants. Conflict arises when the deeply rooted cultural values and belief systems of immigrants are threatened by the hegemonic cultural practices of the host country. The reactions to this conflict could involve multiple possibilities: one, the immigrants may be burdened with the hegemonic culture to the extent of returning to their native country (going-back-home-syndrome); two, they may realise the need for cultural assimilation with the host country and adapt themselves to become a culturally hybrid population; three: they could fight against the socio-religious and cultural practices of the host country to uphold their original ethnic-religious and cultural identity. The first possible reaction would mean an identity crisis for immigrants and the second possible reaction would mean a re-creation of their identity through cultural assimilation and negotiation. The immigrant populations suffer the change in culture due to change in their space, as explained by Dr Rafia Rehman<sup>3</sup> (2021):

Social, political and spiritual spaces collide with geographical environments in the book, complicating the issue of cultural identity. The novel depicts how refugees' ethnic identities influence how they travel and organize themselves in their host country. (p. 973)

Along with this conflict, the immigrant population faces the threat of marginalization and discrimination since they are a minority in a foreign country.

In the case of the novel *Brick Lane*, the immigrant population of Bangladeshis live in Tower Hamlets, London. We need to underline the fact that the hegemonic culture that threatens the Bangladeshis in London is cosmopolitan, multiethnic and multicultural. When a city breeds a multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual and cosmopolitan population, several subcultures of art, music, lifestyle and food habits too emerge in the city. Whether these subcultures or trends are healthy is a different matter of argument, but these trends affect youngsters immediately. In *Brick Lane*, the second generation of Bangladeshi immigrants (characters such as Tariq and Shahana) come under the influence of subcultures such as drug addiction, alcoholism and a fashionable lifestyle popularised by the white youngsters of London. In this way, the personalities of the immigrants children transform due to cultural flux. They live in what Dr Rafia Rehman<sup>3</sup> (2021) calls numinous spaces, taking Dr Homi Bhabha's concept of 'liminality':

Numinous space is the nexus of divergent roles, but it defies borders and erases the distinctions on which rigid systems are built. The idea has been used in postcolonialism to demonstrate the presence of the cultural space between the occupied and the colonizer. (p.971)

The immigrants' children appreciate the Western culture more than their native culture. This transformation is discouraged and despised by their parents who still adhere to the traditional values of their motherland.

The author has tried to show the impact of migration on various characters in the novel. The novelist does not focus more on incidents but she focuses more on the responses of characters to their surroundings and incidents.

### Migration and Identity Crisis

The author Monica Ali takes several characters as focal points to discuss the impact of migration on their identities. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is similar to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* because, in both these novels, the reaction of first-generation and second-generation Bangladeshi immigrants towards cultural transformation is vividly presented. While the first generation shows rigidity and resistance, the second-generation immigrants show affinity towards the new value systems that London offers to them.

The character of Chanu represents the attitudes of the first generation of immigrants. Chanu is a Bangladeshi who settled in England with the hope to get a better job and status in England. He feels superior to other Bangladeshi migrants as he is educated in English literature at Dhaka University. But when he lands in England, he faces the first disillusionment. He observes that in the white-British society, an educated Bangladeshi is equal to an uneducated Bangladeshi peasant. He struggles for more than thirty years to create a place for himself among the white British people yet, he fails to do so.

Chanu tries to mimic Western culture. He wears a coat like the British and learns to recite the poetry of famous English poets to make an impression upon his other Bangladeshi immigrant friends such as Dr Azad and others. He wishes to 'fit in' into British society by imitating the lifestyle of the Englishmen artificially. His talkative and philosophizing nature makes him look funny throughout the novel. His words are more impressive than his actions. He cannot make any progress in his career and as a result, tries different odd jobs to look after his family.

Chanu's behaviour is that of a hypocrite who is confused about his identity. His initial romance with the Western culture makes him a man of Western cultural tastes. Outwardly, he tries to project himself as a genteel, educated, refined English gentleman. He wishes to move in the circle of educated men and women in London. But inwardly, he is still stuck in the orthodox, male-chauvinistic and patriarchal value system that he inherits from his Bangladeshi family. Within his family, he is an authoritative figure but outside his home, nobody cares to recognize this Bangladeshi immigrant. This loss of identity in the British society frustrates him and the initial romance with the Western culture gives way to despair. He starts blaming Western society for being racist. Nazneen while speaking to Razia acknowledges the fact:

'My husband says they are racist, particularly Mr Dalloway. He thinks he will get the promotion, but it will take him longer than any white man. He says that if he painted his skin pink and white then there would be no problem.' Chanu had begun, she had noticed, to talk less of promotion and more of racism. (Ali,72)

This rationalization is used as an ego-defence mechanism by Chanu to protect his image as a 'learned and able man' within the family. He employs his two daughters to turn the pages of his books when reads any book. In front of his daughters and wife, he keeps reading English books to impress them with his 'Western knowledge'.

After failing to earn a good job and identity for himself in London, Chanu realises that he is unfit for life in London. This is Chanu's identity crisis. He calls himself the victim of the 'immigrant tragedy' which he defines thus:

"Chanu had said. *Man works like a donkey. Working like a donkey here, but never made a go. In his heart, he never left the village... What can you do? An uneducated man like that. This is the immigrant tragedy.*" (Ali, 140)

From this point onwards, he starts having what Dr Azad mentions as the 'going-back-home-syndrome'. A sudden change in his personality is observed. He starts despising people who embrace Western culture. Chanu finally decides to overcome this identity confusion by asserting himself as merely a Bangladeshi Muslim. His attraction and appreciation for the English culture vanishes and he starts showing his Bangla patriotism in front of his daughters. Chanu's patriotism is not a true one, but an opportunistic one. He takes pride in his Muslim identity and his Bangladeshi heritage only after realising that he has no place in the multicultural, cosmopolitan London. It is a regressive behaviour that he resorts to, once again to protect his self-image. He explains Dr Azad of his intentions of going back to Bangladesh for the following reasons:

'I don't need very much. Just enough for the Dhaka house and some leftovers for Ruku's education. I don't want him to rot here with all the skinheads and drunks. I don't want him to grow up in this racist society. I don't want him to talk back to his mother. I want him to respect his father.'" (Ali, 111)

Chanu tries to protect his self-image within his family but his failures are revealed to his wife Nazneen through Mrs Islam. She learns about the loans that he keeps taking Mrs Islam to showcase his aping of the Western lifestyle. Once again, this is an attempt to mimic the Western ways when he is not capable of it. But these things are revealed to Nazneen who realises that Chanu 'cannot find a place for himself in London'.

Failure to assert identity with firmness and confidence, confusion over cultural roots and values, and feeling of being uprooted, alienated and discriminated against in a foreign culture are the prominent reasons for Chanu's identity crisis. However, Chanu's efforts to hide this confusion and failure from his family are noteworthy. As a male breadwinner of the family, as a patriarch deeply rooted in Bangladeshi Muslim culture, he did not want his family to see his failures which could mean a lack of self-respect for him. Chanu's condition could be better explained in the following words of Iain Chambers<sup>4</sup> (1994):

"Cut off from the homelands of tradition, experiencing a constantly challenged identity, the stranger is perpetually required to make herself at home in an interminable discussion between a scattered historical inheritance and a heterogeneous present." (p. 6)

#### **Migration and Identity Formation/Reformation:**

Monica Ali tries to show the other two possible results of migration as already noted in the introductory part of the article. Along with Chanu's identity crisis, she also shows the impact of migration and the multicultural atmosphere of London on the formation and re-formation of identities. Cultural hybridity is one of the results of migration. Ali shows this cultural hybridity majorly through the characters like Razia, Mrs Azad and Nazneen's daughter Shahana.

Razia plays a major role in introducing the city and its culture to Nazneen. Although belonging to a lower middle class, Razia thinks that it is best to adapt herself to the ways of the British people. As a result, we see her following the Western lifestyle. She is seen wearing a 'Union Jack' sweatshirt all the time and even smoking cigarettes. Razia's adoption of this lifestyle could be her reaction against the patriarchal and male-dominating culture of Bangladesh in which she has grown up. She disowns her ancestral cultural values which restricted a woman from liberty, freedom and social life and reflects the perfect example of hybridity which is defined by Dr Rafia Rehman<sup>3</sup> (2021) as:

"Hybridity is described by a tendency to assimilate elements from a new culture while remaining content with the original culture, resulting in the replacement of old beliefs and adaptation to new environments." (974)

When London offers her opportunities for a liberal way of life, she embraces the values of personal freedom. She is outspoken about the hypocrisies of women living in Tower Hamlets. She informs Nazneen that Mrs Islam is a hypocrite and that in the name of helping Bangladeshi migrants, she keeps lending loans to people at a heavy rate of interest. Razia is blamed and criticized for her open-minded nature and imitative behaviour not considered 'respectable' by orthodox people like Chanu. However, by being careless about what people say

about her, Razia represents the spirit of freedom and independence the city has offered to her. For Razia, cultural hybridity is the best possible method to live as an immigrant in a foreign land.

Another strong example of cultural hybridity is the character of Shahana, the elder daughter of Chanu and Nazneen who represents the second generation of immigrants. It is quite natural for the second generation to embrace the Western culture because they have never seen their parents' motherland. Shahana is exposed to the Western lifestyle, culture, language and social groups right from her childhood. Ali writes about the girl's fascination for Western culture thus: "Shahana and Bibi stood next to Nazneen, Shahana with her back to the palace. She wanted to have her lips pierced. This was the latest thing. Last week she wanted to get a tattoo." (Ali, 292).

Shahana appreciates London more than Dhaka in many ways. She never shows interest towards learning anything about Bangladesh and Bengali language and is happy with her identity as a British young girl rather than as a Bangladeshi. Easy assimilation of youngsters with Western values is despised by their parents. Chanu fails to understand the fact: "Migration is a one-way trip. There is no 'home' to go back to." (5).

Mrs Azad too represents cultural hybridity in the novel. She prefers Western culture over her Bangladeshi traditions because she is practical woman. She needs to fit into the society in which she lives. Same is the case with Dr Azad who has become an English gentleman. The novelist also reflects that the immigrants, after modernising themselves in the Western ways, do not like to have social connections with other orthodox and rigid immigrants. Although Chanu (an unsuccessful immigrant) invites Dr Azad for dinner at his home, he is never invited by Dr Azad in return. Cultural hybridity among the immigrants also creates a class division and marginalization, discreetly. Dr Azad and his wife develop a feeling of superiority over Chanu and Chanu feels marginalized by his people.

Nazneen's transformation from a young-naïve housewife into an independent woman, and a decision-maker reflects a transformation in her identity. Nazneen reflects Darwinian principles of evolution. She patiently evolves through situations and becomes the toughest! Although being a Muslim immigrant, she does not become obsessive about her religious identity unlike her husband. She is an achiever at a personal level, focusing on her personal growth through compassion, love and perseverance.

Nazneen comes to live in England by chance, not by choice. The London city, which she keeps looking at from the window of her house in Tower Hamlets, is an unknown territory for her in the beginning. She eventually comes out of her cocoon and explores the city, learning its language, culture and lifestyle. Within her home, she is a suppressed wife under the authoritarian control of Chanu. After the death of her first child, she suffers from emotional trauma and becomes nostalgic. However, a believer in fate, Nazneen continues carrying out her duties towards her family and in her free time, socializes herself in the neighbourhood. London or Bangladesh, the place does not matter to her.

Nazneen gradually gets to know the outside world. She learns about Muslim activist groups through Karim and supports him in his activism. Inwardly, she remains neutral about religious activism. As a woman, adaptability is a gift to Nazneen; she does not complain about the Western society being racist but embraces Western values with equal grace and at the same time, she keeps her religious and personal identity unaffected by the world around her.

The author shows how the city offers anonymity, space, freedom and opportunities for people without gender bias or racial discrimination. Nazneen, earns money and thus grows into an independent woman with her sewing work. At the end of the novel, even when Chanu decides to go to Bangladesh, Nazneen is confident and self-assertive. She is confident about taking up the responsibilities of the two daughters as a single parent in England. She decides to stay in London, the city which shapes her personality.

To know how London might have influenced Nazneen in her transformation, we need to look at the alternative narrative of her sister Hasina who lives a miserable life in Bangladesh. Hasina cannot overcome miseries in her life, mostly due to the restrictive, orthodox and prejudiced atmosphere that is there in the villages of Bangladesh where she lives. For Nazneen it is possible to transform herself from a submissive wife to an

independent, confident and powerful woman only because of the freedom and opportunity that the city of London offered to her.

Identity formation in urban spaces depends upon various factors. One of the important factors that shape one's identity in a city is politics. Monica Ali has also thrown light upon the impact of religious and ethnic politics on Muslim immigrants. Hegemonic culture always tries to suppress the minority culture. In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali writes about the domination of white Christians upon Bangladeshi Muslims. The Tower Hamlets becomes a place for communal rivalries. The tussle between the white youngsters' group 'Lion Hearts' and the Bangladeshi youngsters' group 'Bengal Tigers' reflects the problems of immigrants and the intolerance of the white British people towards the immigrants. While immigrants fight for their rights, the natives complain that the Bangladeshi immigrants are a threat to their religion. Karim, an important character in the novel represents the restless, activist youngsters who are eager to assert their religious identity strongly in a foreign country and fight for their unity. Karim keeps organizing meetings of Muslims in Tower Hamlets with a desire to unite all immigrants for their secure existence in the country where they are a minority. The characters such as Karim, who are activists are a byproduct of the city's political structures. There is always a tussle between groups of people for political power and social security. The rivalry between the Christian youth and the Muslim immigrant youth shapes the political dynamics of London city in this novel. Karim's identity as an activist is also a product of migration. Karim never goes to Bangladesh, and never learns the Bengali language but stands up for his religious identity.

### Conclusion

Monica Ali's concern is over the status of immigrants and their pivotal socio-political position in London. Being minority in race and religion, Bangladeshi immigrants in London face threats and challenges to identity. However, the author feels that it is important to record the lives of immigrants who choose to live and influence the city space of London despite several challenges. Cultural hybridity and retention of original religious and ethnic identity are the two possibilities that she explores in this novel. While cultural hybridity implies amalgamation and neutralization of identity, the urge to retain true identity makes the characters more polarised and radical in this novel. Through the portrayal of characters such as Karim, Nazneen, Chanu, Razia, Dr Azad, Mrs Islam and others in the novel, Monica Ali has covered up all the possibilities of the socio-political-religious existence of the Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants in England. She becomes the voice of all the Bangladeshi immigrants in London who struggle to survive in the hostile climes of cosmopolitanism.

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