

# Analytical Evaluation of Monica Ali's Brick Lane

Vinod Kumar Mishra<sup>1\*</sup> Poonam Pandey<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Govt. T.R.S. College, Rewa (MP)

<sup>2</sup> Research Scholar, University Teaching Department Rewa (MP)

**Abstract – Monica Ali took birth in 1967, in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She immigrated to Britain in 1971. She grew up in Bolton, Greater Manchester, and studied politics, philosophy and economics at Oxford University. She worked in publishing, design and branding before having children, a son and a daughter, and starting to write. Her first novel Brick Lane, which was first published by Doubleday in the UK in 2003, has been shortlisted for the 2003, Man Booker Fiction. Later on, it was also published by Black Swan in 2004. Brick Lane has been translated into 26 languages. Monica Ali lives as a writer with her family in London and “was named in 2003 by Granta one of the Best of Young British Novelists. Among contemporary authors Monica Ali definitely counts to the newcomers.**

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## INTRODUCTION

The novel, Brick Lane, focuses on the major aspect that its characters have been put on earth just to suffer. Development and change in Nazneen's life comes to the surface. However, the ending remains uncertain. It deals with, an epic saga about a Bangladeshi family living in London, which explores the British immigration experience. The novel is highly clashed with its most essential aspects of identity, belonging and community problems. People who actually live in the estate of Brick Lane feel being patronized by Monica Ali's novel the more or the less.

This research paper consists an exact analysis and interpretation of the novel attending to the most important aspects like characterization, the structure and the theme of the novel. It deals with the question if Brick Lane suits the values of post colonialism with close regard to postcolonial theory.

This paper also brings out that all the problems which are cursing the human should be abolished from the society and man should move to solve family and other problems

Ian Jack, the editor of the Granta Magazine said: “Brick Lane is a fine first novel, but nobody should be surprised if it raises similar arguments. In a way, they are a compliment to it to an ambitious idea of what fiction can still do.”[2]

Brick lane is the story of Nazneen who is brought to London by her new husband of an arranged marriage, Chanu. Attempting to live in harmony with the people around them, they make friends with several ex-pats and try to preserve their culture

amidst the abrasive and unaccommodating London society. Marriage OF Nazneen struggles until the birth and very shortly after the death of their only son. In the midst of grief they come to understand one another better. Nazneen has two daughters after that. Chanu is miserable with his life and determines to move back to Bangladesh, treading all over Naznee's hopes and dreams in the process. After a brief affair she decides to leave him and raise her two daughters in London alone. The protagonist is not beautiful, but not so ugly either. The face is broad, big forehead. Eyes are a bit too close together. Nazneen could say two things in English: sorry and thank you and is dependent on Chanu. If Chanu demands something, Nazneen obeys saying “If you say so”. She is young, inexperienced and submissive. Her feelings towards Chanu are unclear. Was she beginning to love Chanu, or just getting used to him? Her main task is to run the household. The protagonist feels lonely: “What she missed most was people. Not any people in particular but just people. In all her 18 years, she could scarcely remember a moment that she had spent alone until she married. And came to London. Fate is important to Nazneen As Nazneen grew she heard many times this story of ‘How You Were Left To Your Fate’. It was because of her mother's wise decision that Nazneen lived to become the wide-faced, watchful girl that she was, Fighting against one's Fate can weaken the blood. As a baby Nazneen was left to her fate to her mother's decision. Religion is also very important to Chanu's wife. She prays and reads the Qur'an a lot. In the course of the novel, Nazneen undergoes a change. She starts to work and explores London. Furthermore, she learns English. In addition, Nazneen makes own decisions and does not

always do what Chanu wants. She develops her own personality well and has an own opinion which she defends. much of her life is an object lesson in passivity, her character is honed by experience, grows less soft around the edges and turns out to be full of courage.”[2] The elder mother has a strong nature and gains acceptance with herself and others. In the end, she even decides to stay in England against Chanu's will. Although she betrays her husband having an affair with Karim and her life is full of doubts, she is in fact a caring and loving mother who knows what she wants. In the course of the novel, Nazneen has developed from a shy, introverted and submissive personality into a character that has achieved total freedom and finally does what she wants to do in life at the end. She goes ice skating and even dances and sings she waved her arms, threw back her head and danced around the table letting it all go loose. For the first time since she has come to London, she has started to live properly. Nazneen embodies the theory that you are exposed to your fate.

Nazneen's is a story of awakening. It starts with her marriage, which is not of love but of necessity. Her parent decides that she will marry the significantly older Chanu, according to the tradition of her culture. Although she knew this was a possible fate, Nazneen is somewhat shocked by the reality of her marriage. She's swept off to a foreign country where she is forced to live with a stranger and to befriend many other strangers. Her constant disenfranchisement by her husband's harsh rule leads her to resent him. As she later realizes, however, Nazneen is responsible for her feelings of resentment because she has allowed herself to become his subject. Anywhere along the lines she could have said no and left. Granted she would have definitely faced awful obstacles along her solitary journey, but she would have been free. This acceptance of responsibility is what finally gives her the strength to leave Chanu, with the children.

As an immigrant, Nazneen struggles to adapt to her new cultures. She does better than Chanu, however, who openly rejects all things British. He feels threatened by the culture and does not see how it could ever be compatible with his own beliefs. Knowing that compromise is the path to harmony, Nazneen tries to both embrace London and to remember Bangladesh and her family. She writes to her sister, Hasina, who is really struggling back him. By practicing open-mindedness she soon finds that she has many friends in London. Chanu's biggest fear is confirmed when she decides to stay in London when he says they must move. In his mind she has rejected her people completely, but to Nazneen it was a necessary step. She is no more afraid of assimilation than she is of her husband.

The novel has a three-tier structure that maps the evolving landscape of each principal character. Significantly, Chanu is not from Sylhet. He presents

himself as a minority within a minority, suggesting his alienation from a community he perceives to be regressive, parochial and overly religious. An aspirational immigrant, Chanu purports to be highly educated and has framed certificates to prove it. He represents the Bangladeshi immigrant who is brimming with optimism about carving a great, solid future, only to have his dreams consistently thwarted. He idealistically talks about creating a 'mobile' library, which would 'bring the great world of literature to this humble estate' and by doing so would open the eyes of the Sylhetis who seem voluntarily castrated from the rest of the world. He pities those Sylhetis complacent within the parameters of their close knit communities who refuse to learn English and never 'leave home', preferring to keep their hearts 'back there' and 'recreating the village here'. Dr. Azad, Razia, Mrs. Islam, Hasina, Karim, Shahana and Bibi as well as Tariq and many more are other characters of the novel. These play very good role in the novel. I disagree with the critics of this novel that Nazneen is "the least dynamic character in the novel".<sup>[3]</sup> Nazneen and Chanu, if at all, seem to be the most dynamic characters in Brick Lane. While a dynamic character undergoes a change and development, a static one remains the same.

I would subdivide the novel into two main parts. The year 1967 can be read as an introduction or a kind of preface to tell the reader the importance of fate. Page fifteen and sixteen in a way already tell the reader the most important facts that are going to happen to Nazneen until she will be thirtyfour). The years from 1985 to 1988 tell Nazneen's first years of her London experience and make up the first main part of the novel. The main event is the loss of the first child. Then the time period from 1988 to 2001 is told through letters from Hasina to Nazneen. This can be considered as fast motion. In Ali's book, a distinctive feature that runs through the novel is Nazneen's resilient bond with her sister and with other women in her community.”<sup>[4]</sup> The second main part of the novel takes place from February 2001 to March 2002. All the development and change in Nazneen's life comes to the surface. However, the ending remains uncertain. According to the value of time, it is most affecting and moving how much Nazneen and her husband achieved in this long period of time with regard to all their aims in life. Indeed, they have not reached much. Another important and much more occurring aspect here is the treatment of language in the novel. The book is at first something of an anti-climax – slow, claustrophobic and wordy a good 300 pages.”<sup>[5]</sup> Nazneen is passive while later on after about the first 300 pages Nazneen behaves in an active way rather and the action gets more tense and vivid. First of all, the novel is read in English. It is written in one language but supposed to be taking place in another. Brick Lane comes to the reader as if it were a work of translation. The reader has to

imagine that most of its characters are talking in Bengali. The use of modern English to represent another language works smoothly if the reader can forget about it. Ali constantly reminds the reader of English being a foreign tongue to the central character. There are also disturbing collisions. Shahana speaks English at home against Chanu's will. Nazneen's first conversation with Karim takes place in clumsy alternations of Bengali and English. Hasina's letters are phrased in a broken, often incorrect English Good good place and house too good also that is intended to give the impression of Hasina's semi-literate written Bengali. Another eminent instrument of language in the novel are similes. They belong to its central character defining Nazneen's moments of perception. When she wanders from her council estate, the similes are what she clutches.

Brick Lane has the theme of Racism. When Chanu and Nazneen move to London, they take up residence in Brick Lane, a multiethnic neighborhood. Nazneen meets a lot of other Bangladeshi immigrants like herself and becomes invested in the community there. Chanu, however, who must work is exposed to the outright hateful racism of the rest of the city of London. As an immigrant, he is ignored and despised, treated like dirt. They can't seem to see past the color of his skin. Chanu on the other hand is responsible for being averse to the culture in which he's working, opposing any white man and decrying their traditions in favor of his own.

Disenfranchisement of women is shown in the novel as a Bangladeshi girl, Nazneen is given in an arranged marriage by her parents to her husband, Chanu. Although he treats her well overall, it is not a particularly loving marriage. In England Nazneen finds herself wanting to work like the other women around her. Chanu will not permit her to work nor even to leave the house without a male escort, as is customary in their native culture. Nazneen has no control over her important life decisions as she is the subject of her husband's will. Later on Chanu becomes determined to move back to Bangladesh, so he allows her to work in order to help them move faster. Eventually Nazneen is fed up with her lifestyle and starts an affair with Mrs. Islam's son. She leaves Chanu and stays in London with her daughters when he moves. Free of his dominant rule, she opens her own sewing store and begins to live out her dreams.

The theme of Motherhood is found in the novel. Nazneen gets pregnant with her son not long after the move to London with Chanu. Both are excited to become parents, eager to raise the boy in the traditions of their culture. Chanu in particular wants to ensure his son is raised to respect his Bangladeshi culture, so he decides to move the family back to Bangladesh. Tragically the boy dies before they move. The couple is knocked low, but somehow they unite in the midst of their sorrow. The loss brings them closer together. In a few years

Nazneen is the proud mother of two daughters, fulfilling her loss.

Family is identified as a theme. The Ahmed family is the center of Nazneen's life. Her lifestyle is determined by her family and her position relative to her husband. As is customary in his culture, Chanu controls her every move and does not allow her much personal autonomy. Nazneen finds solace in her children, first the son who dies, and later her two daughters. When their son dies, Nazneen and Chanu reunite over their grief. They become a more harmonious couple and learn to listen to one another better. Unfortunately Chanu soon forgets that connection as social pressure persuades him to act out of fear of assimilation into British culture. In the end Nazneen chooses her daughters over her husband. They were married by tradition rather than love, but they did develop a kind of love for one another. But ultimately Nazneen finds her family and her purpose in her daughters and is committed to raising them in London. An additional narrative strand covers the experiences of Nazneen's sister, Hasina through the device of her correspondence.[6]

Post-Colonial study concerning fact and fiction in the novel Brick Lane is in order. Important to point out is that this is a fictional work. The characters do not exist outside of the author's imagination and the context of the novel. The fact that Monica Ali uses research and real-life settings makes the story plausible, almost real. Her clever use or adaptation of various writer-techniques link the novel to both the long tradition of European literary creativity and the Post-Colonial writings which are gaining ground in- and outside the boundaries of dominant and oppressive ideas and notions which flourished during the height of the British Empire. Monica Ali takes up sensitive and factual issues pertaining to Bengali culture, Islam and Muslim women's right to determine their own future, through the use of fiction. The novel depicts a young woman's search for identity and purpose in life, strongly contrasting with the loss of identity and direction by her much older Bengali husband and, the search for lost ethnic and religious roots as seen through her lover, Karim. They are shadows, who meet momentarily in a fictional twilight zone, unable to resolve their differences in manner, attitudes and goals in life. Their destiny lies in the hands of the author and the imagination of the reader and is not to be confused with reality, as this book, in fact, often is. It is true to say that the religious protests directed toward Brick Lane and its author clearly show that fiction can in fact lead to heated debate and discussion within multicultural societies. It is in fact authors such as Ali, who open the door to further inquiries pertaining to Bengali culture. Fiction should empower the reader's imagination and the fuel the quest for literary experiences beyond reality, whilst still willing to learn the truth behind the fictional story. Novels are obviously translated and

understood according to experience and inexperience; background and expectations representative of the individual reader. This is similarly true of *Brick Lane*. Every reader-experience is very personal and judged according to individual literary expectations. Monica Ali's interpretation may or may not be the same or accepted interpretation of the Bengali community, but she defends her right as a fiction author to present the world as she sees fit and in line with her story. She utilizes western perceptions of eastern culture, carefully balancing them between cultural realities which constrict and determine an individual's position within an ethnic or religious community and the unlimited possibilities fiction has to offer her reader. In this instance the multicultural settings of East London during a time span of almost thirty years. Interestingly, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* remains unchanged and static. This is her version of reality, seen through a telescope with limited view; a necessity created to allow the characters to interact, develop, flourish or go to seed. Her characters adopt and adapt to westernization or suffer the consequences of not being able to acclimatize and succeed. The colonized individual either rejects or conforms to the values and demands of the former colonizer's world. The main argument of this essay is to show that fiction dictates the fate and the actions of the protagonist Nazneen, as it does the major antagonists, Hasina, Chanu and Karim, whilst still maintaining some essence of reality by the use of factual settings and history, making the characters themselves and their individual fates more plausible to the reader. More importantly, it allows to distinguish the author's reality of *Brick Lane* from the real *Brick Lane*. Ali's *Brick Lane* exists in a literary grey-zone of fact and fiction, where the characters of the novel follow their destinies and live their lives through the reader's imagination and not necessarily through the insights of the author

In summing up it can be said that *Brick Lane* is a critique of the culturally relativistic views promoted by advocates of post colonialism and multiculturalism in the West. Stressing the universality of the desire for freedom and autonomy, Ali's liberal point of view seeks to shed light on the predicament of less powerful members of non-Western cultures, such as women, who are oppressed by the customs and traditions of their cultures. By employing a liberal perspective, however, Ali not only oversimplifies the cultural concerns of the Bangladeshi immigrants in England but also reproduces a problematic and stereotypical picture of Bangladesh. Thus, she vindicates postcolonial arguments regarding the inadequacies of liberal perspectives in understanding non-Western societies and cultures. Espousing different perceptions of cultures and individual agency, Ali and her postcolonial critics also stand for two distinct sets of concerns, experiences, and aspirations. In opposing one another, these two perspectives serve to complicate our overall conceptions of non-Western societies and cultures.

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## Corresponding Author

**Vinod Kumar Mishra\***

Research Scholar, Govt. T.R.S. College, Rewa (MP)