

“Othering” in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane

SIZINA JOSEPH

Assistant in English in Govt. Girls High School
Attingal, Trivandrum. Kerala.

This paper deals with a postcolonial analysis of Monica Ali’s Brick Lane. How this text is evidence to the concept of “othering,” forms the basis of this work. Through her novel, does Monica Ali suggest a hybridity or syncretism of cultures is what this study intends arriving at. This paper aims to highlight Monica Ali’s (of Bangladeshi origin, relocated to England) colonial stance as she portrays Bangladesh in her novel. While the central theme in a postcolonial diasporic literature is the negotiation of two identities, the question of whether Ali suggests anything beyond is enquired into Monica Ali’s Brick Lane (2003), her debut novel, shortlisted for the Booker Prize (2003) is the story of Nazneen. Nazneen lived in Bangladesh and relocated to England after she was married to Chanu. As the story of Nazneen unfolds, we are taken to and from Dhaka (Bangladesh) to Brick Lane (London)–the two major settings of the story. Brick Lane with its inhabitants (immigrant Bangladeshis) and Dhaka, both strike us with contrasts and similarities. The contrasts are with respect to the facilities. The depiction of Bangladesh and Bangladeshis, urges one to make a postcolonial analysis of the novel. Monica Ali, a Bangladeshi in origin but settled in London, seems to take the stance of a colonial writer. The colonial agenda of “othering” the East seems too largely written all over the work.

Keywords: Life, Independent, Self-Reliant, Strong and Cultures.

The characters, their attitudes and utterances, the descriptions of the setting, events in the story – all go to emphasize this fact. The “demonic othering” of Bangladesh seems largely writ when compared to its “exotic othering” – revealed through the utterances of Chanu (which seem to be said by Chanu only to reassure himself). The novel written by a person of Bangladeshi origin who now lives in London, may be considered diaspora. The depiction of a longing to be “home” in conveyed through the character of Chanu who a weak person is – one who “only speaks but does not act”. On the other hand, Nazneen the protagonist, who was weak under Bangladeshi influence, emerges strong and independent when she resolves to make England her home.

The novel ends with Nazneen refusing to follow her husband to Bangladesh and resolving to live in London. She feels liberated, having broken free from the shackles of Chanu’s domination. She finds the strength to make this life-changing decision in London. While Chanu shows a belonging to his native culture and angst over getting back home, the novel does not say much about what comes of his return to Bangladesh. Whereas Nazneen, who stays back and has

learnt to live in the conditions that Brick Lane offers, seems to have found herself.

The close of the novel is highly symbolic. Nazneen, attired in a sari (a Bangladeshi outfit) prepares to ice-skate (a western sport). If the novel were to extend over a few more pages, Nazneen would in all probability change to western clothing that would be most suitable to indulge in ice-skating which had always captivated her imagination. Ali doesn't seem content with an amalgam of cultures. When Nazneen replaces 'the Bangladeshi' with 'the English', Ali doesn't suggest just a 'hybridity' or 'syncretism' of cultures but goes a step beyond. She seems to recommend a practical way out in ensuring one's happiness and expelling insecurity, questions of belonging, identity crisis and the like. Ali ends her novel just short of saying this explicitly, but has she left it for her readers to decipher.

This paper deals with a postcolonial analysis of Monica Ali's Brick Lane. How this text is evidence of "othering," forms the basis of this work. Through her novel, does Monica Ali suggest a hybridity or syncretism of cultures is what this study intends arriving at. This paper aims to highlight Monica Ali's (of Bangladeshi origin, relocated to England) colonial stance as she portrays Bangladesh in her novel. While the central theme in a postcolonial diasporic literature is the negotiation of two identities, the question of whether Ali suggests anything beyond - is enquired into.

Monica Ali's Brick Lane (2003), her debut novel, shortlisted for the Booker Prize (2003) is the story of Nazneen. Nazneen lived in Bangladesh and relocated to England after she was married to Chanu. Having been taught by her mother to submit to destiny (as that was all a woman had power to do), she lets destiny shape her life until she meets young Karim. Hither to, a woman unsure of herself, and one who lacked an identity; Nazneen later takes control of her life and emerges independent, self-reliant, strong and happy. As the story of Nazneen unfolds, we are taken to and from Dhaka (Bangladesh) to Brick Lane (London) – the two major settings of the story.

Brick Lane - with its inhabitants (immigrant Bangladeshis), and Dhaka, both strike us with contrasts and similarities. The similarities arise from the fact that the inhabitants in both places are Bangladeshis. The contrasts are with respect to the facilities. The depiction of Bangladesh and Bangladeshis, urges one to make a postcolonial analysis of the novel. Monica Ali, a Bangladeshi in origin but settled in London, seems to take the stance of a colonial writer. The colonial agenda of "othering" the East, seems implied all over the work. The characters, their attitudes and utterances, the descriptions of the setting, events in the story – all go to emphasize this fact.

Evidence from the text to Support my Argument

An analysis of the chief characters of the novel – to reveal 'othering'.

Nazneen, the protagonist, from a village of Bangladesh, is an 18 year-old-girl when she reaches Brick lane (London), after being married to Chanu who is 20 years older than her. Her marriage and her relocation to London were rewards of destiny which she had only to accept gracefully, as taught by her mother. For Nazneen, "what could not be changed must be borne.

And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was mantra, fettle and challenge.” (Ali 16).

Having been raised thus, she is “an unpolite girl from the village” (Ali 22) – as her husband describes her. We would expect a person like Nazneen to have felt very homesick and wanting to return to her native as soon as possible. Quite contrarily, Nazneen’s memories of Bangladesh are only connected with her sister. Despite her loneliness and frustration, she is quite enamored by the stark contrast in lifestyle that London offered. “Her father was the second wealthiest man in the village and he never had anything like it. She had everything here. All these beautiful things.” (Ali 21).

Later in the novel, we see that when Nazneen thinks of Bangladesh, she realizes that life there is inconvenient. “When she thought about Gouripur now, she thought about inconvenience. To live without a flushing toilet, to abandon

her two sinks (kitchen and bathroom), to make a fire for the oven instead of turning a knob. ”Towards the end of the novel, we see a transformed Nazneen – one who has taken charge of her life and destiny.

From a timid woman who was unsure of everything (even of who she was and what she desired), one who submitted to destiny, she metamorphoses into a strong woman who could make life-changing decisions. She was no more a woman who just obeyed her dominating husband. She had begun to think. She had begun to speak her mind. Nazneen is now a small-time entrepreneur, who contributes to the family income. While Bangladesh had raised her to be a demure, submissive woman, the positive changes in her personality happened under the influence of life in London.

At the end of the novel, she refuses to accompany her husband back to Dhakka-Bangladesh. She decides to make Brick Lane her home and raise her two daughters there. The arrangement that Nazneen has is that Chanu could visit them in London whenever he wished to. When her daughters ask her if they would ever go to Bangladesh, Nazneen’s answer is “Staying or going, it’s up to us three.” (Ali 480). The freedom to make this decision of staying back in a foreign country or to move to another country (Bangladesh) was now a woman’s – something that could not happen in Bangladesh.

Chanu, Nazneen’s husband, would call from Dhakka once a month. “How are things with you? Shall I send money?” (Ali 487)- Chanu would ask. “No”, she said. “We are all right.” (Ali 487) – was Nazneen’s answer – though “all month they ate rice and dal, rice and dal.” (Ali 488). Nazneen learned not to yield, but to struggle. She had learnt not to be frustrated, but to fit into Brick Lane. She was finally happy and liberated. “She had found herself.”

CHANU, Nazneen’s husband, who is older than her by 20 years, is made a caricature through the descriptions of his clumsy appearance, his self-importance, his high-sounding ideas, his way of articulating them as though he were on a stage and talking to an audience, his shifting attitudes towards Britain and Bangladesh. His declarations about his greatness, about his being

educated are in fact a defense against his own sense of inadequacy. He tells Nazneen, “It is lucky for you that you married an educated man. That was a stroke of luck.” Ali gives us many reasons to resent him. But as we turn pages and read more about Chanu, we realize that Ali’s characterization of Chanu is veiled. The real Chanu is never revealed to us directly. It is only towards the end of the novel, through a slow and deliberate dissection of his idiosyncrasies, that we see that Chanu is actually a sensitive human being, husband and father, besides being intelligent and insightful.

Chanu has been in England for more than half his life. When he reached England, he was young. He had ambitions, dreams. “I was going to join the Civil Service and become Private Secretary to the Prime Minister. That was my plan. And then I found things were a bit different. These people here didn’t know the difference between me who stepped off an aero plane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only the lice on their heads “...I will be a success, come what may. That’s promise number one. Number two, I will go back home, when I am a success. And I will honor these promises.”

But these declarations are met by his listeners (Nazneen and Dr. Azad – a doctor and fellow migrant) with either boredom or ridicule - “Very good, very good,’ said Dr. Azad and he checked his watch.” (Ali 35). As Dr. Azad thanks Chanu and his wife for their hospitality and takes their leave, Chanu says: “We intellectuals must stick together.” When Chanu says this with a flourish and satisfaction of having made a good impression on his guest, Dr. Azad’s answer is: “If you take my advice, one intellectual to another, you will eat more slowly, chew more thoroughly and take only a small portion of meat. Otherwise I’ll see you back at the clinic again with another ulcer.” (Ali 35)

Chanu came to England with ambitions of becoming Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, but takes up a job at the Council, quits it, takes up a series of small jobs like dish-washing, shifts from job to job and eventually gets Nazneen to work and depends on her income to supplement his. The change in Chanu’s aspirations and beliefs are not shown as adaptability or resultant anti-colonial frustration. They are rather presented as evidence of his unstableness and flimsiness.

Some of Chanu’s speeches, if analyzed, are intelligent and convincing ruminations of an anti-colonial intellectual. “In the sixteenth century, Bengal was called the Paradise of Nations. These are our roots. Do they teach these things in the school here? Does Shahana know about the Paradise of Nations? All she knows about is flood and famine. If you have a history, you see, you have a pride. The whole world was going to Bengal to do trade. Sixteenth century and seventeenth century. Dhaka was the home of textiles. Who invented all this muslin and damask? It was us.

All the Dutch and Portuguese and French and British queuing up to buy. This is not what they teach. All flood here and famine there and taking up collection tins.” (Ali 185, 186). Such outpour of pride in one’s country is rewarded with silence, indifference, annoyance, anger or ridicule from his listeners. When Chanu makes these statements, he is sadly described as “rehearsing his evening lessons” (Ali 185) and “playing to the gallery.” (Ali 186). With Ali having painted a clownish picture of Chanu, and getting him to speak highly of Bangladesh,

readers are inclined to take the cherished history of Bangladesh lightly. With Chanu being introduced as irksome and repulsive and with his listeners dismissing his speeches as uninteresting, incomprehensible or nonsensical, the readers might not care to delve into the meaning or gauge the weight of Chanu's statements.

Contrary to this, Nazneen's thoughts of Bangladesh are replete with its superstition, unclean surroundings, misery that befalls her lonely sister (in striking contrast to Nazneen's being happy and independent, although single in a foreign land). Nazneen eventually resolves to live in England, unlike Chanu who returns to Bangladesh frustrated. Nazneen's characterization wins for herself the reader's sympathy at first, appreciation later and admiration towards the end. Her faults are understandable and easily forgivable. When Nazneen chooses England over Bangladesh, what is the reader to make of it?

KAREEM, a young Muslim radical, born in Britain, enters the text and Nazneen's world by Chanu's arrangement, bringing Nazneen orders for her sewing work. Kareem endears himself to Nazneen and the readers by his youthful charisma and his display of confidence. For Nazneen, he is one "who knows about the world and his place in the world". (Ali 448). Karim, who had witnessed the bitterness of racism since his childhood, has his anger directed at founding a radical religious group called "The Bengal Tigers". The aim of "the Bengal Tigers", as professed at first, was to unite all the immigrants. He led them against the "Lion Hearts", who were British, who opposed the ideas and beliefs of the occupants of Brick Lane.

Nazneen is attracted to his certainty of purpose and his belief in "What we need is action. We must stop talking and start doing." (Ali 260). Towards the end of the novel, we see that Karim's efforts, far from uniting the immigrants, end in a riot that tears apart the community. "The Bengali Tigers", a group rife with inner conflict since its inception, inevitably gives in to its lack of unity and disintegrates into small street gangs fighting against each other. Karim, at the end of the novel, pales into insignificance. Nobody knows his whereabouts or what has become of him. "Karim? He went to Bangladesh." "Or he joined the caravan. That's what some people say." (Ali 485)

We see that earlier Nazneen "had looked at him and seen only his possibilities. Now she looked again and saw that the disappointments of his life, which would shape him, had yet to happen. It gave her pain." (Ali 449). This she notices about Karim, when she has resolved to make London her home. She foresees Karim's doom. And she was proved right when the 'March' organized by Karim (The Bengal Tigers against the Lion Hearts) proved a complete failure and disaster.

Why did Ali create Karim? Was it to give life to a character who was a Britain-born, but of Bangladeshi parentage? One who spoke English well, but stammered in Bengali? One who admires the English life style (as evident in his attire and hair style), but also opposes their racist attitude? One who belongs to both England and to Bangladesh? And what becomes of such a person who belongs nowhere? Ali seems to be saying it aloud that it is impossible to strike a balance between to identities. One has to belong somewhere. For which, he has to relinquish one identity for the other.

SHAHANA, Nazneen's older daughter, who was born and has since been in London, is averse to the thought of having to live in Bangladesh the rest of her life. She dislikes Bangladesh so much so that she runs away from home on being told that the family would relocate to Bangladesh and, as a result, lands herself in trouble. Where does this strong dislike for her parent's native stem from? She has heard stories of Bangladesh from both her parents. Chanu's love for his hometown, his narratives of its glorious past, descriptions of the 'exotic' Bangladesh has, apparently, not touched Shahana. This could be because Chanu's words either fall on deaf ears or are taken lightly. There aren't explicit descriptions of Bangladesh in Nazneen's conversations with her daughters, but we might decipher that the descriptions might have been tainted by the contrasts in London-life which Nazneen was beginning to notice and enjoy.

Razia, Nazneen's close friend, neighbor and fellow migrant, is widowed and has to look after her children and herself. She sees the potential this country has and decides to be independent. She learns English, cuts her hair short, takes up a job, stops wearing a saree. In the novel, Nazneen says about Razia: "She was wearing a garment she called a tracksuit. She could never, so she said, wear a sari again. She was tired of taking little bird steps" (Ali 95).

Razia, who was raised in Bangladesh and who till now depended on her husband and his income, on having lost her husband, would want to return to Bangladesh – a secure place, being her native. But besides being strong, she knew (from what she tells Nazneen) "If you don't have a job here, they give you money. You can have somewhere to live, without any rent. Your children can go to school. And on top of that, they give you money. What would happen at home? Can you eat without working? Can you have a roof above your head?" (Ali 73).

Razia voices her views about how Britain is far better than Bangladesh in protecting and looking after its citizens. When Nazneen tells Razia about Chanu's unhappiness over the racial discrimination in Britain, she says, "Ask him this, then. Is it better than our own country, or is it worse? If it is worse, then why is he here? If it is better, why does he complain?" Ali uses Razia to convey that: wisdom lies in adopting the culture and ways of the place you live in rather than rue the loss of a 'home' that is distant and unattainable.

MRS. AZAD, the wife of Dr. Azad, who is Chanu's friend, has her way of looking at the immigrant-dilemma. Once when Chanu speaks about "the clash between western values and our own": "I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage", (Ali 113) Mrs. Azad retorts: "Why do you make it so complicated? Assimilation this, alienation that! Let me tell you a few simple facts. Fact: We live in a Western society. Fact: Our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact: that's no bad thing. My daughter is free to come and go. Do I wish I had enjoyed myself like her when I was young? Yes!" Mrs. Azad continues: "When I'm in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here, I go out to work. I work with white girls and I'm just one of them. If I want to come home and eat curry, that's my business.

Some women spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English. They go around covered from head to toe, in their little walking prisons, and when someone calls to them in the street they are upset. The society is

racist. The society is all wrong. Everything should change for them. They don't have to change one thing. That is the tragedy." (Ali 113, 114) Is Mrs. Azad being Ms. Ali's mouthpiece here. Ms. Ali's is a story of immigrant-success. Though of Bangladeshi origin, she has spent most of her years in Britain, has assimilated the British ways and seems to be speaking their 'language', rather than voice the angst of the Bangladeshi immigrants.

Setting

The descriptions of Mymensingh District (where Nazneen was born) and the life and beliefs of its people, draws one's attention to its under-developed and backward state. "Hamid ran from the latrine, although his business was unfinished. He ran across the vegetable plot, past the towers of rice stalk taller than the tallest building, over the dirt track that bounded the village, back to the compound." (Ali 12). Later in the novel, we see that when Nazneen (when in Brick Lane) thinks of Bangladesh, she realizes that life there is inconvenient. "When she thought about Guipure now, she thought about inconvenience. To live without a flushing toilet, to abandon her two sinks (kitchen and bathroom), to make a fire for the oven instead of turning a knob."

Brick Lane, being inhabited by Bangladeshis, resembles Bangladesh in some ways – as Chanu observes that the immigrants have recreated the Bangladeshi villages here. "A thin brown dog sniffed along to the middle of the grass and defecated. The breeze on Nazneen's face (as she stood in Brick Lane) was thick with the smell from the overflowing communal bins." (Ali 18). "And the streets (of Brick Lane) were stacked with rubbish, entire kingdoms of rubbish piled high as fortresses with only the border skirmishes of plastic bottles and grease-stained cardboard to separate them." (Ali 55). The 'othering' of Bangladeshi's is much too obvious here – they recreate their world of dirt and clutter wherever they go.

Ali mentions that the inhabitants of Brick Lane have prospered over the years. She shows that Britain could help their upliftment and growth like Bangladesh could not. These 'peasants' had prospered to occupy a business class. Money had begun to flow into the community as seen from what Chanu tells Nazneen as they pass a fancy new restaurant, "All this money, money everywhere. Ten years ago, there was no money here." (Ali 253)

Later in the novel, Ali talks about the march that Karim organizes to have the immigrants united as one community. Far from uniting them, the march only reduced them to disintegrated, small fighting-factions. An angry Karim, shocked and grieved, says: "It's revenge. And revenge for the revenge. Man, what it is, it's a mess! It's not even about anything anymore. It's just about what it is. Put anything in front of them now and they'll fight it. A police car, a shop window, anything." When Nazneen asks, "The Lion Hearts, did they come?", Karim answers, "About twenty or thirty. They weren't anything." (Ali 475). This is to say that Bangladeshis did not even know what they wanted.

Cultural Differences

Role of Fate (Fate written with a capital F in the text)

Nazneen's childhood, spent in Bangladesh, has witnessed the dominant role of destiny and superstition as it shaped lives. For instance, an unusual-looking newborn – “a monkey-lizard-hybrid-sin-against-God that was buried alive in the faraway forest and the mother sent hence to who cares where.” (Ali 12)

Later, when Nazneen, who was thought to be still-born until she let out the first yowl and cry, was discovered to be alive but weak, we see the midwife say: “The baby lives but she is weak. There are two routes you can follow. Take her to the city to a hospital. They will put wires on her and give medicines. This is very expensive. You will have to sell your jewelry. Or you can just see what Fate will do. Of course, Fate will decide everything in the end, whatever route you follow.”

When Nazneen's aunt suggests she should be taken to the hospital, Rup ban (Nazneen's mother) says: “No, we must not stand in the way of Fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate. That way she will be stronger.” (Ali 14)

Rup ban believed and indoctrinated her daughter to believe that it was good to give in to destiny and emerge strong and that it was foolish to battle destiny. This, later, was the mantra by which Nazneen lived her life until Britain taught her to resist the ways of destiny and to take decisive steps in shaping her life.

Status of Women

Nazneen, who had humbled herself before Fate, and married a man 20 year older, and relocated to Britain; continued to live her life as Bangladesh had taught her. When Nazneen and her husband went out occasionally, “Nazneen walked a step behind her husband” (Ali 252). Nazneen spoke only what her dominating husband liked to hear “If you say so, husband.” Ali says in page 99: “Nazneen did not know what he was talking about. ‘If you say so, husband.’ She had begun to answer him like this. She meant to say something else by it: sometimes that she disagreed, sometimes that she didn't understand or that he was talking rubbish, sometimes that he was mad. But he heard it only as, ‘If you say so.’” Though she told herself she was happy, her frustrations vented into a nervous breakdown.

Such a Nazneen, towards the end of the novel, learns in Britain to add to her husband's meager income and eventually turns an entrepreneur. She later decides not to follow her husband to Bangladesh but to stay back in Britain and raise her two daughters there. One would not expect the shy, demure, village-bred Nazneen to metamorphose into what she did. It was Britain which helped her emerge into a strong and independent woman (financially and emotionally).

Conclusion

The character's utterances and actions, the descriptions of the settings, the cultural differences between the two scenes of action, seem to convey the 'othering' of Bangladesh. The "demonic othering" of Bangladesh seems largely written when compared to its "exotic othering" – revealed through the utterances of Chanu (which seem to be said by Chanu only to reassure himself).

The novel written by a person of Bangladeshi origin, who now lives in London, and about characters who have been displaced from Bangladesh (their home), may be considered diaspora writing. But, the depiction of a longing to be "home" is conveyed through the character of Chanu who a weak person is – one who "only speaks but does not act". Moreover, 'Home' has been painted to look sordid. Therefore, the reader does not appreciate the pangs felt by characters in their being away from 'home'. Ali seems to have taken a colonial stance while she 'others' Bangladesh in her descriptions of Bangladesh and Britain and its people.

Chanu had spent more than half his life in England and his attempt at reconciling his native culture with that of the British only saw his dreams of integration thwarted. He did not learn how to negotiate the British society and had to return to Bangladesh. Was Chanu happy to be back in Bangladesh? The last we hear Chanu speaking about himself in the novel is when Nazneen asks him over the phone about his life in Bangladesh: "Is it how you expected? Is it what you wanted?" White noise filled the earpiece, like a gale caught in the telephone. Then the line cleared. Chan replied: 'The English have a saying: you can't step into the same river twice. Do you know it? Do you know what it means?' She knew." (Ali 488). Clearly, Chanu was unhappy and disillusioned – because Bangladesh had not the charm that Chanu had imagined.

Ali does not approve of Chanu's desire to see a blending of cultures, while he was in Britain. He is left frustrated in his attempts. Retaining the 'Bangladeshi' in him, he finds it impossible to be integrated into the British society. His helplessness compels him to return to Bangladesh. On the other hand, Nazneen the protagonist, who was weak under Bangladesh influence, emerges strong and independent when she resolves to make England her home.

The novel comes to a close with Nazneen refusing to follow her husband to Bangladesh and resolving to live in London. She feels liberated, having broken free from the shackles of Chanu's domination. She finds the strength to make this life-changing decision in London. While Chanu shows a belonging to his native culture and angst over getting back home, the novel does not say much about what comes of his return to Bangladesh. Whereas Nazneen, who stays back and has learnt to live in the conditions that Brick Lane offers, has "found herself".

The close of the novel is highly symbolic. Nazneen, attired in a sari (a Bangladeshi outfit) prepares to ice-skate (a western sport). If the novel were to extend over a few more pages, Nazneen would in all probability change to western clothing, as that would be the most suitable attire to be in while one indulges in ice-skating – a sport that had always captivated Nazneen's imagination. Ali doesn't seem content with an amalgam of cultures. When Nazneen replaces 'the Bangladeshi' with 'the English', Ali doesn't suggest just a 'hybridity' or 'syncretism' of cultures but goes a step beyond. She seems to recommend a practical way out in ensuring one's

happiness and expelling insecurity, questions of belonging, identity crisis and the like. Ali seems to suggest a substitution of cultures rather than a blend. She suggests a relinquishing of one culture for the other. Ali ends her novel just short of saying this explicitly, but has she left it for her readers to decipher?