

WHITE TEETH & BRICK LANE: PERSPECTIVES IN DIASPORA LITERATURE

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Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* are two recent major contributions to Diaspora Literature. Both the novels deal with immigrant Londoners- the gap between their aspirations and achievements, the clash between native cultures and foreign ambiances, the need for assimilation and the fear of dissolution, the reaction of the nationalists and the emergence of the religious fundamentalists. *White Teeth*, with its North London setting, presents a multiracial society with immigrants from different cultural and religious backgrounds, whereas *Brick Lane* having East London as its setting recreates the life of Bangladeshi immigrants living there. Though these novels have articulated some common immigrant issues, they substantially differ from each other in their narrative perspectives, which in turn have influenced their tone, characterization, use of language and dealings with contents. The narrator in *White Teeth* is a neutral outsider observer always keeping her tongue in cheeks; she takes a bird's eye view of the North-West on and finds the impossibility of meaningful communication among the people of different racial backgrounds. In *Brick Lane*, in contrast, the narrator is more than a neutral photographer; she is an experiencing consciousness. To see things from a female perspective, the narrator takes on Nazneen's point of view most of the time; she appropriates the English language to incorporate words and idioms from native language to bring a regional tonality to the novel. In this article I will compare these two novels to show how Monica Ali's microscopic view going deeper into personal relations of migrant population, and Smith's wide-ranging perspective capturing the interaction among people from diverse racial background, present us a composite picture of contemporary London society.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* is a well-written saga of three families of three different racial and

religious backgrounds living in London. Not only that it captures the fierce battle between the old and young generation immigrant and bearing European inheritance through her father, is quite at ease in portraying North London – a racial hotchpotch.

In *White Teeth*, she powerfully and vividly recreates the day-to-day life of the scrubby London Society. She picks up the vernacular English common in that part of London and instills them here and there in the novel quite effortlessly. She brings up such buzzing issues like identity crisis, displacement, assimilation, and racial hatred, cultural integration. In her finely tuned ironic depiction, she shows how the reality of a multicultural society is glossed over by introducing pedantic and impressive ideas as are mentioned. As the novel shows, one can hardly overcome cultural differences and racial prejudices. Though Archie and Samad are friends for a long time, they can never think alike or appreciate one another's decision. Even at the end of the novel Samad expresses doubt about Archie's good intention towards him. Millat or Irie's association Joyace family is another example of impenetrable barrier. These people mix with each other with entirely different reasons in the back of their minds. As a result, a real connection among them seems to be impossible.

Affirming itself as belonging to the group of postcolonial Diaspora Literature, *White Teeth* arranges its subaltern figures in a non-hierarchical way keeping none in the center or creating everywhere microcenters. -

Juxtaposing all kinds of things from Irie's false teeth and synthetic hair to Chalfen's experimental rat, from Samad's masturbation to the end of the world campaigns in a strikingly non-privileged manner, the novel champions plurality and diversity in a world of mass exodus. Not only

this, amidst the extravaganza of multiethnic groups, the novel tries to add regional color and taste to create ethnic idiosyncrasies. Even it takes care to incorporate the marginalized peoples' version of history, such as Jamaican earthquake or 1857's Sepoy Mutiny in India. Moreover, Archie and Samad's experience of WW2, which is something very anticlimactic, can be found only in subalterns' history.

Even though the novel *White Teeth* tries to do away with imperialistic hierarchy, it creates a center - periphery relation between the omniscient narrator and the characters. As the narrator takes a distanced and noncommittal position to capture the racial diversity of North-West London, she seems at times to be far from the characters - from their views and emotions, their joy and torment. She laughs at the characters instead of with the characters. Following the European literary tradition of objective representation, *White Teeth's* omniscient narrator quite easily records the notso-easy life of the immigrant population in a very playful manner. It may be very post-modern to take things lightly when you can't change them, but Smith seems to be rather Europeanized than post-modern in choosing a privileged all knowing third person narrator to tell the story of a multicultural society. If the novel is a cauldron of ethnic hotchpotch - where Samad, Archie, Irie, Millat and the likes are being cooked, our writer is nowhere with them. Perhaps, the narrator would not sound too privileged if she could bring a more empathetic and less comic tone in her voice.

In contrast to *White Teeth*, *Brick Lane* has a more empathic narrator. As the novel looks closely into the family relations of the migrants from a similar racial background, an intimate narrator is the first thing it requires. Though the narrator in *Brick Lane*, not very unlike the one in *White Teeth*, is an omniscient one, most of the time her point of view seems very close to that of Najneen's, the subaltern protagonist of the novel. Here we discern the presence of a central consciousness, which is an experiencing soul, sharing the sense of displacement and alienation of the diaspora existence. *Brick Lane's* narrator sounds as an inmate of the Tower Hamlet spinning a chronicle of 1st generation immigrants coming from Bangladesh. The problem of emotional conflict is felt more acutely and immediately here than in *White Teeth*. As the novel focuses on the

predicaments of only Bangladeshi immigrants clustered in apartment complexes like Tower Hamlet, it can present the lurking problems in a very intense and precise manner. This empathy brings a homely tonality in the novel, which is very much aware of the feeling of homelessness. Though the reality is made no less harsh, the narrator's virtual participation in the suffering of displaced existence makes it more humane. Thereby the novel resembles the story "How I was Left to Fate" told by Nazneen, which contains in it all human emotions as well as reality. In contrast, *White Teeth's* preoccupation with the various attitudes and conflicts of multi-cultural society where there are people from different cultural and religious background makes the living experiences of immigrant generation sound like impersonal and far off things

Again, if we compare the character of Chanu in *Brick Lane* with that of Samad in *White Teeth*, we will see the impact of narrative perspectives on characterization in these two novels. Both Samad and Chanu are middle-aged expatriates with frustrated aspirations. Both are suffering, in Dr. Azad's term, from 'going home syndrome'. Rather eccentric in keeping alive their own racial and cultural identity, they overdo their roles as parents. Consequently, they end up creating misunderstanding in their offspring. Being unhappy in their conjugal life, these unlucky men retreated to their own personal worlds. In spite of these fundamental similarities between these two characters, we view them in quite different lights in their respective contexts.

White Teeth's distanced and personal narrative perspective presented Samad as an unworthy, pathetic, and ridiculous figure. Though there is a lot of truth in the depiction of the character, sometimes exaggeration and sometimes carelessness have left the character incomplete and lifeless in the end. Samad's preoccupation with Mongle Pande is drawn to such an extent that it becomes tedious and unnatural. Samad's character is made to be constant source of fun. Considering the novel's over all comic ethos, this could be overlooked, if the comedy was seasoned with a bit of sympathy. In contrast with Samad, *Brick Lane's* Chanu is a more remarkable character. Chanu is portrayed as a pathetic, ridiculous, cruel, and hopeless character, but the narrator's perspective does not fail to surface his subliminal good qualities as well. As we view him apparently

through Nazneen's eyes, our opinion of Chanu gradually changes and we come to know the fine shades of his character, and we cannot but sympathize with him in his struggle to retain his dignity. Not only Chanu, *Brick Lane* presents us other living characters who develop over time whereas *White Teeth* shows us a charade of static figures who remain same through out the novel. *Brick Lane* begins with a Nazneen who was sold to the pawnshop of fate and ends with a Nazneen who is enterprising enough to attempt iceskating wearing a saree.

Besides its influence on characterization, a personalized narrative perspective goes well with the recreation of regional vive in the novel *Brick Lane*. With its focus on the immigrant population coming from a particular country, *Brick Lane* creates a strong regional tonality by appropriating the language. There are a number of words and proverbs from the native language (Bengali). Most of the time the meaning is not given, but is recognizable from the context. Besides, there is a whole parallel depiction of the story of Hasina, a garment's worker living in Dhaka, written in the manner of letters, and here we see the classic post colonial problem of representation. For, how can one translate the demotic form of native language and still make it sound demotic? Isn't it the same problem of translating native experiences in a foreign language? Monika Ali tries to solve her problem by abrogating the Standard English and using glaringly wrong English in Hasina's letters.

How far she succeeds in her attempt to appropriate her language can be subjected to further scrutiny, but on the whole, *Brick Lane* manages to create spaces for the native land and language in a tale of migrant people. Though female writers have authored both the novels, *Brick Lane* takes a clearly feminist perspective whereas *White Teeth* fails to see reality through a woman's eyes. Female characters in *White Teeth* consist mainly of Aslana, Clara, Irie, Joyace Chalfen and a lesbian couple. None of the characters can stand apart with their own merits, without any reference to their husbands. Throughout the novel they remain either eccentric like Aslana or passive like Clara. Preoccupied with history, genetic engineering and fundamentalism, the novel entirely fails to address any serious feminist issue. In *Brick Lane*, on the contrary, the reality of the diaspora existence is viewed primarily from a feminine perspective. The doubly marginalized protagonist of the novel,

Nazneen, as a married women experienced double migration. She leaves not only her native land to settle in England, but also her parental household to live with her husband in his claustrophobic apartment. Nazneen's feeling as an immigrant, therefore, is quite different from that of Chanu. Being always in an inferior position in patriarchal society, Nazneen does not care for social status as Chanu does. Rather her feeling of deprivation comes mainly from the sense of bondage, lack of moving space in both literal and metaphoric sense. Freedom is the thing she values most and aspires for. Once she comes to know her power to choose her own destiny, she just cannot leave a country, which gives her the opportunity to do so. Thus for Nazneen, England is not a place to earn money or a degree or take historical revenge, it's a place where she can exercise her power to choose her own destiny.

Both the novels bring up the issue of religious fundamentalism. However, the difference in their presentations is that *White Teeth* shows it in a very narrow light, whereas *Brick Lane* attempts to fathom the underlying factors that have given birth to such radical groups. In *White Teeth*, we only find the religious fundamentalist~ groups like Kavin, which are keen on creating anarc y and boys like Millat joins them just to use up their pent up energy. *Brick Lane*, in contrast, shows us that it is often nationalist and racist uprising against which these Islamic groups take their positions; and in such groups, we have different kinds of voices-not all are for radical change. *Brick Lane* presents reality as complex and problematic; we need to go beyond the surface to see the intricate workings of various factors, which determines the social and psychological make up of a migrated population.

To see the subliminal factors behind the behavioral patterns of the immigrants, it is better to have a very intimate and empathic narrator, who will not be far more privileged than the characters in his/her knowledge of reality. As loss is a permanent trace of Diaspora existence, we need a sympathetic voice with whom the immigrants can make an emotional connection. For, it is about uprooted people who have migrated to an alien society for political or economic reasons. Till now, the immigrants are socially and politically marginalized. The feeling of homelessness, together with the sense of being cornered, makes the Diaspora experience very unique, and *Brick Lane* tells the story of such

experience. On the other hand, in an era of mass migration, interaction among the people coming from diverse cultural background is an unavoidable reality, and to represent this reality, we need a broad perspective as *White Teeth* gives us. Thus,

these two addition to the realm of Diaspora literature compliments each other; one with its microscopic vision and another with its all-embracing wide view, give us a whole picture of the multi-cultural London.