

**“THE NOTION OF WOMEN AS BEARERS OF CULTURE IN
MONICA ALI’S *BRICK LANE*”**

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ABSTRACT

Alistair Cormack (2006) describes *Brick Lane* as a 'post-colonial story' with a 'realist narrative'; to a post-colonial critic, this has many implications. Yet looking at this text from a feminist point of view has many further dimensions. Women in this novel function as a direct representation of their cultural bearing. They follow the rules set for them by society and map their behaviour according to these notions, in such a way that they institutionalize their love and as such their lives. In Ali's *Brick Lane*, published in 2003, I have looked at some of the qualities women are expected to have in Bangladeshi culture, the roles/responsibilities they are meant to take on and the cultural teachings they are forced to inject into their lives. To do this, I look at the women characters in this novel; I have put them in two groups-some who carry out their prescribed roles all through their lives, others that defy these rules. Yet, all act as bearers of their culture, whether they reside inside or outside their country. Through my paper, I have analyzed the discrepancies in Bangladeshi culture between the roles of men and women, how women take on these roles and how they function in this context, as represented in this realist text. This paper is important as it talks about the current position of women in Bangladesh. Despite various groundbreaking achievements by women in various parts of the world; women still remain confined to their homes and more so into the ideological products their culture expects them to be by framing themselves into the notions set for them by their culture. In retrospect, this paper also indicates how women try to achieve the standards their families/societies create for them and hence how they themselves become bearers of their culture.

Keywords: Women, culture, bearers, nation, gender

In her book *Writing Diaspora*, Yasmeen Hussain says, “Culture is not genetically inherited but is instilled by upbringing within a given cultural context or a given set of parallel contexts, within which an individual has to learn about such ideas as race and gender”. (2005:3-4) Women in any given culture encapsulate the identity her culture shapes for her although in certain cultures her roles are more specific than in others. Jane Hiddleston calls this the “manufactured expectations regarding Bengali culture” (2005: 61). A woman in Bangladeshi society takes on new roles in every relationship she is bound into. As a child, she performs the role of the 'dutiful daughter' (Beauvoir, 1963), as a wife, she takes care of her household and gives birth to (hopefully) male offspring and as a mother she raises her children and builds a family. By giving birth, not only does she serve the community, but by taking on these roles she maintain the traditions and cultures of her

society. Thus, women lead their lives based on expectations from their family, society and community, and hence function as bearers in this context.

In this paper, I will try to explore the above mentioned ideas through a close reading of the text *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali and identify narrative strands that help investigate the idea of women as cultural bearers. More specifically, I will look at the ways in which women are treated as “cultural bearers” in Bangladeshi society, even when they are outside their native land. In order to do this, I examine two contrasting groups of women characters; First, I will try to demonstrate how Nazneen, the central character of this novel and those similarly positioned like her strive to fit into the roles expected of them from society, from early infancy into childhood. The second group consists of those who are treated as outcasts by their

society/family as they refuse to play the roles ascribed to them and thus fail to act as bearers of their culture.

Brick Lane is about a Bangladeshi migrant family living in London (Brick Lane). Chanu, who has been living in England for several years, goes home to marry a traditional Bangladeshi village girl. *Brick Lane* is essentially about the quest of identity for Nazneen, about intergenerational conflicts, about racism and is a realist and post-colonial text in the way that it represents lives of the Bangladeshi community living in the Tower Hamlets of Brick Lane. The notions mentioned in the preceding paragraphs will be important in the arguments presented below.

The roles, characteristics expected of/from women

One of the first women characters we come across in this novel is Banesa. Although she plays a very short part in the progress of the novel, her character is quite important as she is a midwife and it is she who delivers Nazneen. Thus, at the very beginning of the novel Ali shows us a woman who bears the weight of culture on her shoulders; as her profession itself involves the birth of babies.

Giving birth to male offsprings, as talked about previously is highly important in countries like Bangladesh; as such this becomes an important aspect of women's roles and responsibilities. In her book, Wilson says that giving birth to sons is one of the major requirements of being a woman in South Asian cultures (2006:11). Barbara Einhorn furthers this thought; she says that women also 'bear babies for the nation' (Collins, 1999:126-7 in Einhorn, 2006:203). The idea behind this is that sons carry on the family lineage (and thereby the future of the nation), whereas daughters leave and become part of their in-laws household. Such beliefs are exemplified through Chanu's character. While Chanu had great hopes and aspirations for his son who passes away, he does not see the same kind of future for his daughters. Rather, he hardly gets along with his daughters, especially their eldest, Shahana. Also, their marriage seems to slowly crumble after their son dies almost as if their son somehow held the power to hold them together. At one point, Nazneen wonders if it would be different had Shahana been a boy. Ali indicates how Bangladeshi culture values male offsprings and in return values women who produce sons. Nazneen's status in her family as well as

society is immediately uplifted once their son is born, while this was not the case with her daughters. Thus, giving birth to boys is an important achievement that not all women are lucky enough to demonstrate.

Amrit Wilson says, "One of these roles, given to Asian women by their families and communities, is to be the upholders and preservers of 'our culture'" (1978:39) and it is exactly this characteristic which the women folk of this novel are seen to portray. For the typical Bangladeshi women, living inside or outside her motherland, her culture expects her to act in certain ways. It is a well-known belief in Bangladesh that (Bangladeshi) women are usually shy, patient, and subservient. That is the case too when Nazneen was born and she did not take her mother's milk for many days, so everyone thought she was going to die. When she finally starts to suck, her mother cries out in pain "for the relief of a good and patient women". Thus, quite early on in the novel we witness Ali's portrayal of the characteristics women are meant to uphold.

Women are also expected to manage their households, look after their husbands and children and to not step outside the thresholds of their houses alone. 'Home is where the heart is and where the woman (mother, lover) is also.' (Massey:1994 in Fenster: 2005). Working is thus not even an option. Ali gives us such hints of the cultural manifestations throughout the novel, such as the first time Nazneen steps out on the streets alone. 'Belonging to' in these societies, says Wilson, means 'having the protection of'" (by male members of the family), where 'belonging to' ultimately means "being a possession of the extended family". (2006:9-10). Thus, women are meant to be protected and looked after by their husbands, fathers, brothers or even cousins, as is the case with Nazneen who is accompanied by her husband wherever she goes.

Women are usually expected to accept everything that happens to them without questioning, be it fate or the decisions (made for them) by their male counterparts. Nazneen's principle in life and also her mother's advice to her is "What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne." (2003:11) Nazneen's mother tells her when she is a child that "If God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men" (2003:64). All through the novel, her mother's voice tells her repeatedly to "bear"

and "endure" (2003:267). These sentences clearly depict the difference in roles men and women are expected to take on in Bangladeshi society. Women are meant never to object or question; they are taught from early childhood to bear, adjust and be patient and this is evident from Nazneen's mother's advice to her and more so from Nazneen's behaviour pattern (as a result of her mother's teachings) all through the novel.

While women characters in the novel are familiar with some of these expectations due to their upbringing, others are acquired after their marriage. Yet, these come naturally to them. Nazneen never talks back to her husband, except when he asks her a question. All their conversations are single ended. She dutifully cuts the corns on his feet, cuts his hair and also cuts the hair in his nostrils. Even if Chanu blocks her way and stops her from working, she does not ask him to move (2003:30). When they go for a family outing, Nazneen wants to explore the site with her girls. But she feels that to leave Chanu alone would be a "dishonour" to him (2003:246). Thus, Nazneen suppresses all her desires, and honours those of her husband's as seen repeatedly in the novel.

As mentioned earlier, male members of the family are the ultimate decision makers. Hence questioning their authority is not an option for the quintessential Bangladeshi women, and more so the wife. When Razia, Nazneen's closest friend cuts her hair short, the first question Nazneen asks is "He (Razia's husband) wasn't angry?" (2003:59). When Razia smokes in her house, all Nazneen can think of is "whether Chanu would be back before she left" (2003:155). Nazneen thinks at one point that if she did not do the housework properly, "A wife could reasonably be beaten for a lesser offence." Again, she thinks "...it was foolish to assume he would never beat her. He thought she was a 'good worker'...He would be shocked if she lapsed" (2003:16). Haseena also shares similar views. In one of her letters to Nazneen, she says "Just because man is kind to wife it do not mean she can say what she like. If women understanding this no one will beat" (2003:19). Thus from their reactions it is obvious that they have grown to believe that their purpose in life is to manage their households, to look after their children and families and to do everything according to their husband's desires (and not do what they will not approve of); if they lapse at all in fulfilling these duties it is *reasonable* to be beaten up.

Another role that women/mothers take on is to be the mediator between the children and their fathers. This is a common practice in Bangladeshi culture where the fathers are strict and unapproachable, and hence any message that needs to be delivered to them is done by mothers. Nazneen too takes on the role of the mediator between Chanu and Shahana. She thinks, "It was upto her to balance the competing needs, to soothe here and urge there, and push the day along to its close." Later, she goes on to say that "she felt dizzy with responsibility" if things went wrong in the house. (2003:168) Again, when Shahana is upset with her father, she kicks her sister and then her mom. Nazneen, like most mothers in Bangladeshi society is caught in between her husband and children, expected to balance everything and thus the ones who suffers most in the process.

It is the women's jobs to hold the family together, to protect her family and to see that it remains unharmed. This relates well to one of Nazneen's childhood memories. She recalls an episode when a woman in her village had too many children to feed, yet her husband wanted to sleep with her. She asks the jinni (spirit) for help and he tells her to line up the children in front their father and ask him to choose which ones to kill and for each one who is killed, she would sleep with him and give him another child (2003:330). This symbolizes how women not only have to tend to their husbands' physical needs and their children's' simultaneously, but also how it is up to them to find solutions to all of their problems. She has to work relentlessly, to sustain her family, whether she does so by providing (financially) for her family or not. Even Mrs Islam (who is portrayed as the negative character) feels it is her duty to provide for her grown up sons (2003:255) who do not seem capable of doing anything with their lives. Thus although men bring in the money to run the family, it is the women whose job it is to manage everything and hold the family together. When things don't go well in the family then too, the woman is at fault. When Chanu prepares to go back to his native land, Nazneen blames herself for their failed marriage. She thinks that had she painted the wardrobe, or grown plants etc (2003:283), their lives could have taken a different turn. It is Nazneen who earns money, when Chanu quits his job. But even then she takes on "the old and honourable craft of tailoring (2003:170). It is again Nazneen who under desperate measures takes on the responsibility of her family. As I have stated

earlier, women are expected to construct themselves into the image of the archetypal homemaker. Yet, when everything around them crumbles, it is women who stand strong and solve the problem. Through this, Ali demonstrates how women hold themselves at fault when things fall apart and how they alone bear the responsibility of creating the perfect homes. This notion of the family and the home being the sole responsibility of women comes up again and again in this novel, especially through the character of Nazneen.

The roles of the ideal woman as prescribed by Bangladeshi culture, are so strongly inflicted upon Nazneen that she seems to fit into these, completely at ease; as if that is the only way to be. Hussain says, "What the women in the text (Brick Lane) refuse to do is see themselves and their cultures as inferior or alien. Here ethnicity becomes a source of positive rather than stigmatized identity. (Barot al., 1999 in Hussain, pg 91). This theory too holds true for Nazneen. As a child, when Nazneen sees her mother crying, she herself wants to "...begin to wear this suffering that was as rich and layered and deeply coloured as the sairs that enfolded Amma's troubled bones". (2003:84) She is not only aware of her cultural place but also sees this in a positive light from early childhood. When Nazneen's father arranges her marriage with a man much older than her, she says "Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma." (2003:12) and later tells him that "He had made a good marriage for her" (2003:15). Hussain's words prove to be fiercely true in the scene when Nazneen is walking along with Chanu in the street. She says, "For a moment she saw herself clearly, following her husband, head bowed, covered, and she was pleased" (2003:210). These instances stated above indicate yet again how the cultural bearing has a strong influence on Nazneen's identity and how this shapes her life in spite of her being away from home.

Throughout the novel, everything that Nazneen does is either about Chanu, her daughters or about Karim; her life revolves around them and is dictated by their desires. Even when she is having a relationship with Karim (an instance when one would think Nazneen would do as she pleases), and Razia asks her if she is in love with him, she says, "Everything goes against it. Family, duty, everything" (2003:358). Nazneen feels she has earned herself "a place in hell for all eternity"

because of her affair with Karim (2003:282). One day she is not bothered whether Chanu comes in and finds Karim using the computer and she is shocked by this revelation. She calls it "the first real stoicism she had shown to the course of her fate" (2003:287). Nazneen is guilty due to her illicit relationship with Karim and feels almost immediately after, that she deserves to go to hell because what she did was wrong. The doctrines set for her by society force her to put her family and children above all else, including her happiness. Yet, Nazneen is braver than our average female protagonist. She refuses to leave with her husband when he goes back to Bangladesh and remain in London with her children; although they are still in touch.

While women take on some of these traditions instinctively, others are forced onto them by male members of their family. Chanu appreciates the qualities Nazneen has as she is from the village. He describes her to someone on the phone with the words, "Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children." (2003: 17). But he proudly declares his wife to be "very shy" in front of Dr Azad (2003:23). When Nazneen wants to learn English he says, "Where's the need anyway?" (2003:28) and when she wants to go to college with Razia, Chanu says "You're going to be a mother" (2003:62). Karim, like Chanu also thinks Nazneen is "the real thing", "a Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home" (2003:380). Thus, the male characters in this novel have similar ideologies regarding the roles/responsibilities of women, how they should behave, and how their characters ought to be shaped. It is their views that are also typical of Bangladeshi society and hence these views are forced upon women, and as such act as their code of conduct.

Women as threats to their culture

Einhorn says that women are not only cultural bearers of their families or communities, but also of their nations. She goes on to say that women, both "'represent' the nation through moral virtue and social norms, and to reproduce the national/ethnic group in biological as well as cultural terms". On the other hand, women are also always suspected because they "may choose to express their sexuality" or "procreate-with the 'wrong' men" (Nagel, 1998:259, Yuval-Davis, 1996; 1997 in Einhorn, 2006:203). In the previous paragraphs, I have tried to indicate how the women characters in this novel act as bearers to

Bangladeshi culture through representing ethics and morality of their cultures. In the next few paragraphs, I will talk about those that are 'suspect characters' because they have not confined their behavior to what their culture expects from them and also since they acted against its set laws.

Wilson talks about the story of the 'infidelity gene'; she shows how female sexual liberty is clearly categorized as deviant, a disease that could be carried and transmitted genetically" (2006:7). "Honour", she says is closely related to "prestige, reputation and male ego" (2006: 13). She goes on to say that "Reputation is a tremendous, conservative force, controlling, to differing extents, everyone in Asian societies. It is related directly to male pride or Izzat" (1978:104), a theory that functions constantly in the novel. Wilson says that "their (women's) clothing and manner must always be modest" (2006:10). "In fact a women's sexuality is 'unclean' by its very existence, not as a result of her actions" (2006:12). This idea of a women's sexuality being her own fault is clearly demonstrated in Hasina's letters to Nazneen. She quotes Mr Chowdhury in one of her letters, who later rapes her. He says, "These boys like wax around a flame. They come close and they melt. How they can help this thing? It is you who must take care.' Later on in another letter, she says of one of her colleagues in the garment industry who describes her as "the rotten one" by going to close to whom one can go "bad" (2003:130). Thus, it is women again who are responsible for men's reactions and misdoings and also to guide/keep men in the *right* path.

Hasina further acts as a suspect character as she marries the man she has chosen for herself. Hiddleston states, "Many critics who praise the rest of Ali's narrative struggle to accept Hasina's letters as a convincing indication of the suffering experienced as a result of defying one's parents in favour of a "love marriage" in Bangladesh" (2005:62). But through Hasina's story, it is exactly this that Ali portrays: the tradition of Bangladeshi society which confirms to the belief that love marriage results in pain, loss and failure. Wilson talks about love marriages in the South Asian context; she says, "that you were putting yourself first, before your culture, your community and even your parents, that you were placing your parents at risk because it is they who would be disgraced" (1978:106). Thus, in a way Hasina is made to suffer because unlike Nazneen, she

prioritizes her own needs over those of her family and society.

Razia, is a strong suspect character in this novel since she functions as the mirror opposite to Nazneen; dressed in western attire, Razia works, smokes and unlike Nazneen, does everything the Bangladeshi community condemns her from doing. Chanu does not like her because he thinks she is not respectable. Yet, Razia takes charge of her life and does not bend to her husband's will. After he dies, Razia works and provides for her family and faces every challenge that comes her way; even when her son starts taking drugs she remains strong and deals with the situation. Nazneen is Razia's only friend and it is in Razia that Nazneen finally confides in about her relationship with Karim. All through the novel, Ali gives us no reason to despise Razia. On the contrary, the reader becomes quite fond of her carefree ways. Yet, because of her "British ways" and because she does not mould herself into the role of the typical housewife, the society abandons her. A similar case is that of Mrs Azad.

Mrs Azad is another example of women who refuses to adhere to what her culture expects from her and hence becomes a symbol of a woman *gone bad* due to western influence. Mrs Azad has a different set of values and ideals (compared to Nazneen and hence the Bangladeshi community in London), and is also happy for her daughter to adapt to western ways; in retrospect, she is presented in quite a vulgar way in the novel. Mrs Azad not only drinks and smokes, but also fixes her underwear with her thumb and burps loudly (2006:88). Mr Azad is ashamed of his wife and unhappy in his marriage. He is shown to be, or rather Nazneen sees him as a man who has lost his pride and has a broken home, a home that she has succeeded in providing for her family. Hussain says of Nazneen's reaction, 'Her horror at those who disentangle themselves from the discourse of femininity as defined through culture is evident when she initially encounters the "liberated" Mrs Azad and is critical of all the changes she sees in her friend Razia who asserts her Britishness "almost like the Queen herself"' (Ali, 2003: 358 in Hussain, 2005: 95). Thus Nazneen, who is a follower of all that her culture has taught her to believe, resents the 'immoral' behavior of both Razia and Mrs Azad. Yet, Nazneen herself betrays her cultural ethics when she gets involved in an extra-marital affair. She too in Einhorn's words

'procreates with the wrong men' (Nagel, 1998:259, Yuval-Davis, 1996; 1997 in Einhorn pg 203), and hence also partially becomes a suspect character, although in the end she ends her relationship, succumbs to the societal pressure and thus becomes her culture's bearer.

T H Sharrad says 'Ali's conclusion is more ambiguous, Chanu's inevitable exit to Dhaka and Nazneen's decision to stay would seem to suggest a parting of ways on cultural as well as personal grounds, but the prospect of a future family holiday and rosy relations between the husband and wife smack of compromise' (2007: 15-16). Thus, although in the novel she shows us a glint of independence in Nazneen's character when she decides to stay back in England, her traditional and cultural bearing is so strongly engraved in the root of her origin that they continue to function as part of her core self. Although she acts in an atypical manner by not going back to her native land with her husband, she is still very much a follower, believer and bearer to the demands her culture makes from women.

Nazneen, along with these three characters of Hasina, Razia and Mrs Azad portrays strongly how women bear their cultures, whether it is in a positive or negative manner. Through the character of Nazneen, Ali indicates how she bears the responsibility of her family, her culture and thus her nation by acting in a culturally appropriate manner; through Hasina's, Razia's and Mrs Azad's character she symbolizes how women become misfits in their family, community and country by not conforming to these roles and by not keeping their sexuality in check; while some become cultural suspects, others are culturally responsible, yet all these characters carry their culture through their specific roles in the progress of the novel.

Hussain says that the women characters in *Brick Lane* are "products of ideologies, social practices and social structures...." and that "they are shown to play a distinctive role within transnational communities as the author highlights their role in strengthening kinship ties." (Khanum, 1994 in Hussain, 2005: 91). Through my paper, I have tried to show how women are forced to ingrain themselves in their cultural surroundings, how they function as the entities of their family's (and thereby of society's, community's and nation's) morals and ethics, and how women are blamed and rejected if they do not take on the roles

and responsibilities expected of them by their society/culture. By symbolizing the behavioural patterns that women are expected to follow and by demonstrating how women take them on and incorporate them into their lives, I have tried to portray how women act as bearers of their culture in Bangladeshi society.

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