



IDENTITY CRISIS AND CULTURAL CLASHES : A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MONICA ALI'S NOVEL BRICK LANE

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Abstract

Our culture has a very important influence on our personality . We are the products of our culture. We learn it then it become a part of our life and personal identity . It shapes our values, morals , habits, thinking , social relations and living patterns. When a person move away from his culture to another culture its no less than a trauma for him . Some find it easy to cope with cultural shock while others become the victim of longing and yearning for their cultural roots. They feel torn down between the cultural identity of their hometown and the new place. The present novel “Brick lane” beautifully potrays the immigrant anxiety, their problems and trauma they suffer due to cultural clash. While as shifting from Bangladesh to London gave a tough time to a Bangladeshi couple who feel sandwiched between east and west. At ist they feel isolated , alienated , estranged both socially and culturally . They feel themselves as not a part of culture where they had come to settle now. However in time London provided an opportunity ground for the main Pratagonist –Nazneen who was submissive, shy and traditional wife. At the end of novel we get to see a new face of her . The mute submissive supressed and cow-like Nazneen surprises the readers by staying back in London instead of going with her husband. She became bold , assertive and courageous enough to live and fight for her independent dignified life. While as London sets Nazneen free from cage ; Chanu doesn't have his immigrant anxiety vanished . He keep longing for his hometown and ultimately shifts back alone to Bangladesh as Nazneen along with her two daughters denied to move away from Brick Lane as they feel their roots in England rather than in Bangladesh.

Keywords: *Cultural clash , alienation , longing, home sick , assertive*

INTRODUCTION:

The novel opens with the introduction to the background of the protagonist Nazneen Ahmed, born and brought up in Mymensingh District in Bangladesh and married, at 18, to Chanu Ahmed and they migrated to London. Right from the beginning, Chanu Ahmed is not able to adjust and adjust to the British ways of life as the Asian couple is totally new to the cultural differences and social set up of the London of 1980's. Thus, sandwiched between the original Bangladeshi identity and now a new identity in England, it is not surprising for Nazneen Ahmed and the like, to feel alienated and estranged both socially and culturally. In such a



hard time of identity crisis, all a woman needs is the unstinted support and emotional anchorage from her husband. But, instead of himself understanding this unprecedented situation and helping Nazneen to understand and acclimatize to the new identity both as a diasporic Bangladeshi and as a woman, Chanu Ahmed rather continues to possess and profess the same conservative, parochial, obscurantist and typically Bangladeshi ideology of keeping the woman marginalized or under male hegemony. Perhaps this is the reason why Nazneen resorts to an extramarital affair with a young Bangladeshi boy Karim, whose personality was altogether different from Chanu Ahmed.

Bangladeshi women's experiences of migration in the novel Brick Lane differ a great deal from those of the menfolk. Not only do these women have to adapt to new cultural surroundings or social context, but also have to face gender bias and discrimination from their husbands within their households and society as well. The stickler male Diasporas did not change the gender ideologies of the Bangladeshi community even in England. In reality these ideologies were still being practised within the household of these immigrants; also at Tower Hamlets. "The novel is particularly of interest as an examination of the double bind that female migrants face, treated as alien by their host nation and as commodities by the men in their own communities". **(Rohit Chatrath,2015)**.

Nazneen, for example, feels alienated in England and also like a caged bird of gender within her own flats. She is not allowed by Chanu to go out and therefore she suffers from isolation, alienation and monotony due to repetitive household chores.**(Algan, Yann,et.al)** Whenever she throws up the idea of taking up an employment, she is thwarted by the male chauvinist, who forwards an absurd justification for denial: "Why should you go out? said Chanu. If you go out, ten people will say, I saw her walking on the street. And I will look like a fool" (Ali 30). She remains confined to the domestic environment of the flat. The author takes pains to highlight that Chanu's disallowing Nazneen to work and earn for the family is nothing but a projection of the congenital patriarchal ideology in his very bones. Like Alfred Tennyson, the 'Victorian-voice-in verse', he too believes in the philosophy "Man for the field and woman for the hearth." He therefore, maintains that only man should work and provide the family, whereas the woman better remain in the domestic sphere.

Nazneen, even though migrates to England, still maintains her submissive and meek status within her marriage by keeping her head bowed down, covering her hair and even walking a step behind her husband. Razia Iqbal, another woman like Nazneen, also a first-generation immigrant faces gender based discrimination when her husband too does not let her get employed even though her family needs it direly.**(Gaikand, Anita;2015)**

"He works all day and night. He keeps me locked up inside" (Ali 96), complains Razia. It is only after her husband's death that she does get an opportunity of employment to support her family. In fact, Razia feels extricated from her domineering husband's strangulating clutches after his death, further proving that majority of the immigrant Bangladeshi women



suffer from oppression and suppression due to gender based discrimination. Razia shows her relief, “I can get that job now. No slaughter man to slaughter me now” (Ali 110).

When Nazneen is denied the right to learning; it again corroborates the clashing Ideologies of two genders. She informs Chanu about her desire to learn English as she can’t move out alone because she can’t speak English beyond two words “thank you” and “sorry”, but her narrow-minded husband rewards her by telling her that “you’re going to be a mother... that will that keep you busy enough And you can’t take a baby to college.... (Ali 57). Though unwillingly, Nazneen has to conform to Chanu’s harsh rebuttal which stinks with the malodor of patriarchy. She accepts this commandment and also her fate without any resistance because, firstly, he is her husband and her superior and secondly a woman must always give importance to her gender role than her inner desires. But towards the end of the novel, we see an unexpected metamorphosis in the persona of Nazneen. The drastic from being a subaltern and submissive to a self-assertive and an independent Nazneen is absolutely cogent and convincing both psychologically and socially.

It is a well-established fact that Chanu, suffering from “Going Home Syndrome”, always wanted to return to Bangladesh, his homeland, and he does so at the end of the novel. But the mute submissive suppressed and cow-like Nazneen surprises the reader by staying back in London instead of going with her husband. Rightly remarks Alistar Cormack, “Nazneen has con-fronted her oppression within the discourses of gender, race, and religion and won for herself an independent space”. She does not let fate decide her life, as her deceased mother had preached by her story of “How You Were Left to Your Fate” (Ali 4). She is well and truly on the way of becoming a Free and mentally, physically, emotionally and socially independent woman, ready to break-off the shackles of the ‘patriarchal-tinge’ and establishing her own identity.

Chanu wants to go back because he couldn’t succeed in England. Let’s see why BECAUSE immigrant Chanu looks upon England as a ‘Money-land’. He had come to England with a dream — the dream of his success which the English land offers; he had great expectations that coming to England means thundering success and prosperity, which Bangladesh couldn’t offer him. It reminds us of the ‘rags-to-riches’ formula of the myth of ‘American-dream’ exploded by the American playwright Arthur Miller in his famous (1949) play entitled Death of A Salesman. So, Chanu is a Bangladeshi diaspora failed in England, Chanu proves to be a cultural failure here; his dreams too dash to the ground, gives up. In giving up (by returning to Bangladesh), Chanu gives full vent to his agonies that he has been in England for sixteen years and still could not afford a stable, well paid employment. His dreams of being successful were never accomplished. Chanu could not even save money to return to his homeland.(10) His frustration and disenchantment with England comes to the fore, when he says,

“When I came I was a young man. I had Big dreams. When I got off the plane, I had my degree certificate in my suit-case. I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me. I was



going to join the civil service and become Private Secretary to the Prime Minister. That was my plan. And I found things were a bit different” (Ali 21).

That’s why he wishes to return to Bangladesh after this discomfiture whereas the second generation, all born and raised in Britain, wants to stay there. Hence, the clash. The second-generation of diasporas viz, Shahana Ahmed and Bibi Ahmed unlike their father Chanu don’t wish to go back to Bangladesh because they cannot relate themselves to a country which they have never been to once. Born, brought and educated in England, the duo feel the sense of belongingness in England rather than Bangladesh. “I’m not going, said Shahana. I’ll runaway” (Ali 175). They cannot appreciate the historical narratives about Bangladesh nor its literature. For example, Shahana rebelles against her father Chanu and doesn’t conform to gender ideologies, she wears jeans in place of kameez and she prefers to speak English to Bangla. As Ali puts it:

“Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans. She hates her Kameez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them. If she could choose between baked beans and dal it was no contest. When Bangladesh was mentioned she pulled her face”. (Ali 144).

“As a result there are always conflicts and arguments between Shahana and her father. They have different view points of England because for daughters England was their homeland and they love it like Chanu love his motherland Bangladesh.

Conclusion: We are living in a world of globalisation and rapid urbanisation. People migrate from their homeland to another country in search of job or due to political turmoil interalia . But this creates a variety for problems for immigrants like alienation , cultural clashes and identity crisis. They feel torn down between two cultures; They feel their identity being divided. They neither remain members of their homeland nor of the adopted culture. They become alien in new contrasting culture. However for some Diasporas like Chanu cultural shock is trauma which keep him longing and yearning for his homeland Bangladesh ; But for the main Pratonist Shahana; Brick lane gives her free expression and independent dignified life for which she was yearning since childhood. Her life changed from submissive , obedient , conservative and unassertive subaltern to bold, assertive , independant woman who fight and stand for rights; Who develop courage to say NO to dictating and anhiling commandments of his orthodox husband who had made her life like a bird in cage.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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