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Deconstruction of Social Taboos: The Search for Freedom and Identity in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract: Monica Ali brings together the contemporary issues of Bangladeshi women who migrate to England to fulfil their basic needs but their status remains unchanged there. In the novel, Ali unearths how the women are suppressed and marginalized in the male dominant society. But the freedom and culture of the adopted land invoke in them the desire to search their voice and identity. Nazneen a typical housewife finds herself in the shackle of patriarchal society where her role is defined by her husband only to serve him and his daughters. Her freedom is severely marginalized when her desire to attend the English class gets rejected by her husband in the name of orthodox Bangladeshi culture. But there are some courageous women like Razia, Mrs. Azad and Shahana who raise their voice against the male power and release themselves from the clutch of their master. Razia begins her own business by defying Bangladeshi culture. Mrs. Azad too attaches herself to the present culture by forsaking her native culture and creates such atmosphere at house where she can drink, wear skirt and also guides her daughter to enjoy her freedom like going to pub. The second generation migrant Shahana plays the major role to deconstruct the patriarchal rules of the Bangladeshi community by going against her father's dominance.

Keywords: Freedom, Marginalized, Women, Identity, Culture, Bangladesh.

In the modern times, theories like Feminism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Post-colonial and Deconstruction seek to subvert the notions of centre and structure. Derrida, a major proponent of Deconstruction, tries to destabilise the concept of centre which is, according to him, not eternal and



fixed but constantly in flux. In the present age, centre shapes the structure of the society and provides rules or norms that lead it to a fixed way and thus the centre remains unchanged. Derrida protests it by deconstructing the centre, hierarchy and structure. All the above-mentioned theories propagate the idea that society cannot be regulated by one fixed structure because human life is not fixed but dynamic. So, present self-professed centre is not able to lead the society to a better way. Besides it, it proliferates tyranny, exploitation and repression against the marginalized community in the society. In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali portrays the social fabric dominated by the patriarchal society that represents the dominant power structure where women are considered as merely puppets in the hands of male. The male, in the novel, also symbolize the power of the society that moulds and shapes every aspect of a woman's life. The writer mentions two countries- England and Bangladesh where women struggle for their existence and cultural identity. Bangladeshi people migrate from their birth place to London for the sake of better lifestyle and social status. Some people succeed in achieving it but the status of the women remains almost unchanged.

In the male dominant society, power rests in the hands of the male who impose their own values, norms and customs on women to lead them according to their own vested interest. They consider them as their slaves and make them obey their commands obsequiously. Thus, with the progress of the novel, a voice of resistance is raised by women against the power or oppression exercised by men. So, it is proved that power is not fixed but in a state of transition. Monica Ali portrays, in the novel, the ways in which power gets deconstructed in search of rights, freedom and identity.

Power is a prominent weapon which regulates the various dynamics of the society like religion, race and institution. At present, power is possessed mainly by the patriarchal society. Women play second fiddle to men, and are considered unfit to perform the outside works because of their physical weakness. They consider that women are born for the domestic works like cooking and serving them and their children. Charlotte Perkins Gilman protests such traditional oppression, saying “ in the later part of the nineteenth century, material feminism aims to improve the material condition of women by unburdening them of the “traditional” female task such as housework, cooking, ironing clothes, and other domestic responsibilities” (Bressler 181). The Oxford



Dictionary provides a definition of feminism which lies in: “the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men and the struggle to achieve this aim” (466). Ali, in the novel, portrays the characters like Razia, Hasina and Mrs Azad who struggle to deconstruct the social taboos of the society and try to achieve equal opportunities as men. Razia and Mrs Azad do not care for their Bangladeshi community and start wearing western dress, smoking and drinking. Bangladeshi community does not allow their women to work outside the home but some of them disobey these norms. A note of resistance is raised from the part of Mrs Azad when Chanu comments on the bold behaviour of Dr. Azad’s daughter. He is shocked to see that, as a daughter of Bangladeshi immigrant, she does not hesitate to ask money from her mother to attend the pub in the presence of her father. Chanu comes across a totally different environment from Bangladesh and comments: “This is the tragedy of our lives. To be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy” (Ali 112). Mrs. Azad, as a true feminist, protests Chanu’s comment and tells him that it is natural for our children to live their lives in their own way and follow culture where they are born. Her protest dismantles the norms of patriarchal society and gives them freedom to adjust themselves according to the conventions of western culture where each and every individual has freedom to live as per their own choice. Western culture does not restrict the women to come out from their home for any purpose. Mrs. Azad says: “My daughter is free to come and go. Do I wish I had enjoyed myself like her when I was young? Yes!” (Ali 113).

Mrs. Azad wants to give a message through her daughter that she will not follow any orthodox social norm which does not require their sanction. She represents herself as an iconoclast and a breaker of the patriarchal social taboos that restricts women to enjoy their freedom according to their own will. In Bangladesh, she had to abide by strict rules where women could not go outside their home. But, now in England, she constructs her own identity by forsaking her native culture. In Bangladesh, she had lacked her own identity because they were governed by the male dominant society. She compares the culture of her native and adopted land by introducing the custom of Bangladeshi women who wear sari and cover their head. She violates all the social taboos there by refusing to wear sari and stay at home. On the contrary, she promotes the prevalent custom of the U.S. by criticising her native culture that does not allow their women to go outside their home to



learn the manner of the western culture. The women who spend even more than twenty years in America are still unable to adjust to the western community due to the suppression and subservience by the patriarchal society.

Listen, 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. (Ali 114)

Her argument clearly shows her resistance against the power. She does not want to tie herself with the orthodox culture of Bangladesh where female are considered secondary to male. She breathes a new life into those Bangladeshi women who have a profound desire to see the outside world but the social barrier restricts them in doing so. The noted feminist thinker Elaine Showalter supports the freedom of those suppressed women who have equal talent as the men but the society does not allow them to show it because they think that women are made for domestic work and it is their duty to serve them and their children. She tries to deconstruct the social dogmas in her writing *A Literature of Their Own* where she urges the female writers to make their own body or canon of literature. Women writers generally used the name of their male counterparts to publish their own works because they were not allowed to publish their original work in their own name. In the novel, Mrs. Azad treads the same path which Elaine Showalter had done to encourage her Bangladeshi female immigrants in London.

The protagonist of the novel, Nazneen faces unequal treatment when her father arranges her marriage without asking her consent which is an example of patriarchal dominance. In patriarchal society, the male consider it their right to take decision of women's life. Nazneen's father follows the norms of the society by arranging her marriage with Chanu. She accepts the marriage proposal of her father: "Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma" (Ali 16). As an obedient daughter, she does not think it necessary to ask her father about the details of her future spouse and to watch his photos. But she unintentionally sees it and apprehends that: "The man she would marry was old. At least forty years old. He had a face like a frog. They would marry and he would take her back to England with him" (Ali 17). Nazneen's



submission to her father's choice unveils the perception of patriarchal society where women are considered as the 'other' and they do not have the right to choose their life partner. Simone De Beauvoir argues:

Women were always the negative of the men, where man was the ideal, the norm and the women, the deviant or the other. This is the process of Othering where women will always be seen, not as independent. Men and women are constantly engaged in this subject-other relation where the man is the subject and the woman the other. It is based on this myth of the Woman as inferior and Man is superior. (Nayar 88)

After their marriage, she comes to London with her husband Chanu where she spends her life as an exile because of the utter difference in culture, atmosphere and language etc. She had lived her life as a villager speaking in her mother tongue Bengali but in London, she faces a lot of problems in communicating with others due to her lack of command in English language. In London, she is fully dependent on her husband but Chanu, being the head of the family, tries to govern her inside the house. She realizes that her marriage with Chanu is like a social contract where the bond of love has totally disappeared. Chanu deals with her in a better way because she performs her duty very well like cleaning the clothes, cooking, cutting his corns and preparing his daughters for school. He is happy with her because she is: "an unspoilt girl from the village" (Ali 22). Ali has displayed misjudgement of Chanu who evaluates Nazneen's works by comparing her with a good worker which further shows his lack of emotion for his wife. He has no manner of dealing with family members because he tries to adjust in such a culture where human emotion has a very little place in a person's life. Mahmud Rahman observes:

Stories of migrant women, newly married wives to non-resident South Asian men, are not new to the genre of South Asian writing in English. But I do not recall any other writer who has tackled this particular task, of imagining and fleshing out on the page the life of a young woman who's grown up in a village, who knows only a couple of English words, who must suddenly negotiate an alien country, feel out entirely new relationships with neighbours both Bengali and English, and come to terms with marriage to a stranger. (Rahman 24)

Nazneen makes up her mind to improve her social status by learning the manners of the white by



making friends with Bangladeshi immigrant women and learning the native language, to name a few. Her keen desire to learn English shows her first step towards the deconstruction of the social dogmas of Bangladesh but again, the rigorous patriarchal norms shatter her aspirations. She asks her husband's permission to go outside but he replies: "Why should you go out?" (Ali-45). The social restriction suppresses the voice of her conscience. She again asks her husband but he only tells: "It will come. Don't worry about it. Where's the need anyway?" (Ali 37). From their relationship, it can be assumed that Chanu holds complete power in taking decision of their life. Chanu has authority over his family members because of his cultural root where the male occupies the central position in the family. In this context, Simon de Beauvoir expresses her views in her magnum opus entitled *The Second Sex*: "Man is defined as human being and a woman as a female—whenever she behaves as a human being, she is said to imitate male" (Dar 2). Beauvoir's comment is in parallel with Nazneen's condition who submits herself to her husband which reflects her cultural upbringing where she has no option but to obey her husband: "...she saw that she was trapped inside this body, inside this room, inside this flat, inside this concrete slab of entombed humanity" (Ali 76). Nazneen confronts discrimination on dual plane-- as the Bangladeshi immigrant who is considered alien by the host people and as a subservient woman who does not have due right to do anything without her husband's permission. Cormack comments that the novel *Brick Lane*: "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" (700).

Chanu shows his frustration at his failure as an immigrant. On the other hand, he exhibits his enragement on colonial's rule in India before partition. He has knowledge of the vile face of British people and he knows they are the prime culprit behind the partition of India. He describes the purpose of white men in coming to his native country. He says to his family members: "You see, when the English went to our country, they did not go to stay. They went to make money, and the money they made, they took it out of the country" (Ali 214). He crosses his native sea to England to improve his economic condition. He accuses British government who left his native country as a poor country. Before partition his present country Bangladesh was part of integral India where



British government came with their vile purpose. They made proposal of partition between India and Pakistan which created an opportunity for them to take money to their native country. Indirectly, he wants to say that colonial rule has forced him to leave his native country. Such reasons incorporated anger in him which he vents at Nazneen.

On the other hand, Nazneen gains self-identity when she makes friendship with Razia who helps her to follow the host culture and tells her the importance of the dominant culture in their life. Razia is another revolutionary woman who declines to follow the Bangladeshi culture. She forsakes her own native dress for assimilating herself to the western culture. She purchases the household articles herself because her husband does not help her to buy anything. He spends his whole money in beer and comes home penniless. The hegemonic patriarchy is seen in Razia's house where she is victimized by her husband who does not return home for a long time and does not care that his children use second class toothbrush. She takes a bold decision to deconstruct the orthodox norms of the Bangladeshi society to fulfil her family's aspirations. She says: "I can get that job now. No slaughter man to slaughter me now" (Ali 139). She takes courage to challenge the male patriarchy, gaining strength from her stay in England as she believes that they cannot harm her at least in this foreign land. Her revolutionary nature helps Nazneen to become a self-dependent woman because when her husband decides to return home, she feels nervous at his proposal. She begins to calculate the amount of money they need to build a house at Dhaka and buy the aeroplane ticket. She feels confident when she takes her first son Raqib to the hospital herself without taking any help from her husband. Chanu's unemployment creates financial problem for them. Due to it, Nazneen is tense and desires to go to work with Razia. Her husband does not permit her to do so. Instead, he brings a sewing machine for her that helps her to form her own identity and enables her to fulfil her daughter's demands and send money to her sister Hasina. Sukhdev Sandhu comments on Nazneen's character:

Chanu is a magnificent piece of characterisation, as is Nazneen: a woman uneducated but perceptive, whose intelligence is in danger of being smothered by her own ignorance and sense of propriety. One of the questions of the novel is how much of her subtlety will ever be allowed a voice. (Sandhu 14)



Nazneen's fondness towards the host culture is clearly discernible when she visits Dr. Azad's house with her husband and observes a totally different ambience from her own house. She experiences the present culture through the characters of Mrs. Azad and her daughter who starts disobeying the culture of native land. She finds in her the influence of Mrs. Azad's dressing style when she pulls her underskirt and hitches it up which makes her fall on the mattress:

Walking over the bedspread, she imagined herself swinging a handbag like the white girls. She pulled the skirt higher, and examined her legs in the mirror . . . she raised one leg as high as she could. She closed her eyes and skated off... Her legs wobbled. She opened her eyes and was thrilled by her slim brown legs. Slowly, she drew the left leg up and rested the heel on the inside of her right thigh. She tried to spin, and got caught up in the bedspread and fell on the mattress, giggling. (Ali 141)

She tries to emulate the western manners by leaving behind her own parental culture. At the outset of the novel, she wears the typical deshi sari which shows the influence of Asian culture on her. The major turn experienced by her in her life is the appearance of Karim, a young rebellious boy. He comes to her home frequently, gives her information about radical Islam and invites her to attend the meeting with her husband held by the Bangladeshi Muslim community. She becomes aware of her community people with the help of Karim who informs her regarding the world news. He informs her about the reaction of the white men on the issue of 9/11 in America. He says British people become enraged at this incident and want to take revenge by killing Muslims. They cast their eyes on the Muslims as terrorists and do not want to bear them in their country. They begin to harass Muslim immigrants. Ali points out in *Brick Lane*: "A pinch of New York dust blew across the ocean and settled on the Dogwood Estate. Sorupa's daughter was the first, but not the only one. Walking in the street, on her way to college, she had her hijab pulled off. Razia wore her Union Jack sweatshirt and it was spat on" (Ali 368). Above mentioned female migrants already confront gender discrimination by their own community but now the host people also start to treat them as second class citizen. Communal violence disturbs the life of both the host and the adopted people. Muslim cannot tolerate the label of terrorism on them. Muslim like Karim creates their own group to raise their voice against the host people. Karim says to Nazneen: "Islamic terrorists. Islamic



terrorists. That's all you hear. You never hear Catholic terrorost, do you? Or Hindu terrorist? What about Jewish terrorist? (Ali 407). The Europeans named the 9/11 communal violence which force two communities like Christian and Muslim to immerse to prepare their own group against each other. Karim describes in the meeting: "It's a world-wide struggle, man. Everywhere they are trying to do us down. We have to fight back. It's time to fight back" (Ali 243).

Thus, Nanzeen gets information regarding the communal tension between communities which helps her to find in Karim a fitting companion that she misses in Chanu. Karim's invitation generates in her an interest to attend the meeting but she knows that her husband is unwilling to attend the same. Ever since she has come to London, she acts as a housewife and mother but now she wants to be a member of liberalist Muslim community. As a housewife, her work is controlled by the male dominant society. She does multifarious activities such as washing the clothes, cooking foods, cutting the corns but now England gives her an opportunity to restructure her identity by sewing her clothes. On the other hand, she develops another identity from the wife to a beloved. She involves herself in sexual relationship with Karim in the absence of her husband at her own home. Asian community considers adultery a major sin and Islam too condemns it severely. Nazneen, a follower of Islam, neglects the strict persecution of the holy Quran while committing this act. She goes against the social norms and violates the ethical values of her native culture.

Such a step develops in her courage to take her decision independently. She comes out of the house to save her daughter Shahana who escapes from her home. Her communication with her sister Hasina through letters makes her aware of the present economic crisis of Bangladesh. She also comes to know about the sufferings of Hasina which disappoints her more. She achieves encouragement from her letters. Hasina's situation encourages her to defy the societal norms because she is the first lady in her family who crosses the boundary of patriarchy by eloping with a village boy. She goes against the society and chooses her partner by herself. Nazneen gets courage from Hasina in declining the proposal of going back to Dhaka with her husband because she thinks that her daughter Shahana will not be able to adjust there. Her rejection proves her transformation from a naive uneducated villager to a fully self-dependent woman who knew only two or three words. Now, she discovers her own identity with the help of Razia. As Michael Perfect describes



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about Nazneen's identity:

By the end of the novel, Nazneen has not only discovered a new-found agency but has also achieved both self-awareness and an understanding of the society around her, and has begun to forge an economic and social role for herself as well as a familial one . . . contrary to Chanu's fears, Nazneen does not lose her identity in multicultural London but rather discovers it. (Perfect 119)

Shahana, as a second generation immigrant, straddles the two cultures and tries hard to search her real existence. Chanu imposes his authority on her and tries to keep her away from the vicious effect of western culture but, as a rebellious woman, she disavows her father's order and acts according to her own wishes. Through the difference in opinion between the father and the daughter, Ali shows the dominance of patriarchy where women are considered not better than toys but Shahana destroys the orthodox taboos of the society. Chanu tries to impose the Bangladeshi culture and orders her to recite Golden Bengal. She is reluctant to follow her father's orders and does what Chanu dislikes. "Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans. She hated her kameez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them" (Ali 180). Shahana does not find anyone in her family who wears western cloth. Thus, she becomes a true feminist to dismantle the social norms of Bangladeshi community. She wants to speak in English at home but her father directs her to speak in Bengali. She has been brought up in a country where the dominant language is English. So, it is natural for her to communicate in English but her father tries to curb her liberty. She starts playing double role-- in her father's presence, she pretends to speak in Bengali and in his absence, she starts watching English shows. Her predicament is pathetic when she says: "We are not allowed to speak English in this house" (Ali 193). She is the only woman at her home who disregards Chanu's decision boldly. When Chanu decides to return Bangladesh with his family, she says: "I am not going... 'I'll run away" (Ali 216). She does not prefer to call herself as Bangladeshi. When her father introduces themselves during their tour and says that they belong to Bangladesh, she takes it



ill because she has spent her whole life in England and does not have firsthand experience of Bangladeshi culture. She refutes her father's statement and says: "I'm from London" (Ali 296). Her protest against her father's statement proves that she has become successful in establishing her own identity.

Ali portrays Shahana as a totally different character from her mother. Whereas Nazneen submits herself to her father's decision regarding her marriage with Chanu, Shahana is different from her in this matter. Being nonconformist with regard to social boundation, she prefers taking decision on her own. Her protest for self existence never stops and she regularly disobeys her father's commands that are aimed at curtailing her freedom. Chanu's music from Ustad Alauddin Khan and Ustad Ayet Ali Khan irritates her and forces her to: "put her fingers in her ears and screwed up her face" (Ali 359). In her father's singing, she finds the dominance of patriarchy. Her father asks her how she has become a little memsahib here. Chanu wants to destroy her original identity and inculcate in her Bangladeshi culture but she develops disinterestedness in it. She escapes from the home to search for her identity but her mother sends her back which makes Chanu realize his mistake towards his family members and finally he leaves for Bangladesh. Shahana is successful to gain her identity by deconstructing the norms of male dominant society.

Mrs Islam and Jorina are other Bangladeshi immigrants who are set to combat the patriarchy of Bangladeshi community to find their own identity. Mrs. Islam, an old woman living in England, gives money to the needy immigrants on interest. Ali invests her with masculine qualities because whenever she goes to collect the money, the debtors fear her. Dressed in male outfits she walks on the streets of England with a sense of pride. Jorina works outside to fulfil the needs of her family which hurts the sentiments of male dominant society as they think that women cannot work outside the home. She rejects the societal norms and comes out to establish her own identity.

Monica Ali portrays the lives of the immigrant women who have been silent since their birth under the dominance of patriarchy. Before their migration to England, they thought that men were the masters of their fate and they were created for obeying their orders. Here, the open culture of London provides them with an opportunity to develop their personality and to soar higher in every walk of life. They muster up courage and enthusiasm there which enable them to broaden their



mental horizon and to enlighten their minds with new ideas, views and notions ultimately leading them to empowerment and emancipation. Ali underscores how the basic requirement of human being propels the Bangladeshi immigrant women to step out from their house and engage in work to make both ends meet. The western culture does not only provide them with work but also empowers them socially, culturally and mentally. Nonetheless, it also proliferates moral aridity and spiritual bankruptcy. In the long run, women begin to forsake their native dress, language, food and song and, in turn, accept the bad habits such as drinking, smoking, going to pub and indulging in sexual relationship. Thus, the Bangladeshi women become successful in freeing themselves from the shackles of patriarchy by deconstructing their orthodox rules, norms and domineering attitude.

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