

Social Impositions, Diasporic Trauma, and Reconciliation in Bangladeshi Female Immigrants as Portrayed in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* depicts the protagonist Nazneen's silent acceptance of what comes to her life and exposes her exasperated angst which insidiously wriggles its way out through her inner trauma in silence. The lack of expression intensifies the impact of the trauma which goes unwitnessed, unspoken and unclaimed. Only her grieving daughter is instrumental in healing the mother's incomprehensible trauma by combining her dissociated self and showing an escape to freedom. This paper aims at exploring the traits of a Bangladeshi poor female immigrant Nazneen's disassociated self, and of the struggle and dilemma leading to subsequent trauma she experiences. A qualitative analysis of the novel is performed to trace and explore the struggles of immigrant characters who are in the quest for and formation of their essential identity breaking through the essentialized role, specifically, imposed on women by the chauvinist Bengali society. The study reveals that the dislocated female immigrant's multifold trauma becomes incomprehensible, subsided under layers of social impositions created by nationality, ethnicity, religion, culture, gender, and economic status.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Trauma, Literature, Immigration, Social Impositions, Reconciliation, Brick Lane, Monica Ali*

1. Introduction

Migration and diaspora studies have extensively examined the challenges faced by individuals who straddle different cultural and social worlds. For female immigrants, these challenges are often exacerbated by overlapping factors such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Literature offers a valuable perspective on these issues, providing narratives that shed light on both personal and collective immigrant experiences. Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2003) makes a notable contribution to this field, presenting a detailed portrayal of a Bangladeshi woman's life in London. *Brick Lane* chronicles the life of Nazneen,

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a Bangladeshi immigrant who relocates to London with her husband through an arranged marriage. The novel delves into Nazneen's experiences with cultural displacement, societal pressures, and her gradual path toward self-discovery and reconciliation. These themes are crucial for understanding the broader context of diasporic trauma (Lahiri, 2019) and the ways individuals navigate reconciling their past with their present.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the rich narrative provided by *Brick Lane*, there is limited scholarly analysis on how social impositions, diasporic trauma, and reconciliation intersect in the experiences of Bangladeshi female immigrants as portrayed in the novel. Existing research on immigration literature often addresses these themes in general terms, lacking a detailed examination of the specific dynamics of gender and cultural conflict faced by women in the diaspora. This gap highlights the need for a focused analysis of Monica Ali's representation of these issues. The research aims to address this gap by conducting an in-depth study of the novel to better understand these interconnected themes.

1.2 Research Questions

The study addressed three major research questions as listed below:

1. How does *Brick Lane* portray the social impositions experienced by Bangladeshi female immigrants, and how do these impositions intersect with gender and cultural expectations?
2. In what ways does the novel depict the trauma associated with the diasporic experience, and how is this trauma manifested in the life of the protagonist, Nazneen?
3. How does *Brick Lane* address the process of reconciliation for immigrant women, and what narrative strategies does the novel employ to represent the protagonist's journey towards self-empowerment and identity resolution?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Impositions and Gender Dynamics

The body of literature on gender and diaspora, including studies by scholars such as Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) and Homi K. Bhabha (1994), offers a theoretical framework for interpreting how *Brick Lane* portrays the challenges faced by immigrant women as they balance cultural traditions with adapting to new social environments. Bhabha's writing explores identity, hybridity, and the

psychological impact of colonialism and migration. The complexities of cultural identity in migration contexts are well addressed through his concept of "the third space". With this connection the article argues that Ali's portrayal of Nazneen's experiences illustrates how gender roles and identity crisis can limit personal agency and sustain trauma, yet it also emphasizes instances of resistance, reconciliation and empowerment as an immigrant.

2.2 Diasporic Trauma

The research article places significant emphasis on the concept of diasporic trauma. It analyzes *Brick Lane* for its representation of the psychological and emotional impacts of migration, especially on women who contend with both cultural dislocation and gender-based oppression. Lahiri (2019) discusses themes relevant to diasporic identity and trauma, including the impact of patriarchal structures on the experiences of characters in *Brick Lane*. The article utilizes trauma theories from scholars such as Cathy Caruth (1995) and Marianne Hirsch (2008), who have examined the transmission of traumatic experiences across generations and cultures.

The article argues that Nazneen's internal and external struggles serve as a representation of the wider diasporic trauma faced by many immigrants. The novel's portrayal of Nazneen's challenges with isolation, cultural displacement, and family expectations reflects insights from trauma studies (Brewin, 2001; Caruth, 1996; Felman & Laub, 1992; Herman, 1992; Leys, 2000; van der Kolk, 2014) which indicate that diasporic individuals often endure a deep sense of loss and alienation. Additionally, the article explores how the novel demonstrates coping and healing processes, underscoring the role of narrative in reconciling fragmented identities.

2.3 Reconciliation

A major contribution of the research article is its analysis of reconciliation as depicted in *Brick Lane*. The study explores how Nazneen's path toward self-discovery and empowerment signifies both personal and collective reconciliation (Lederach, 1997). This aspect of the novel is examined using reconciliation theories from scholars like John Paul Lederach (1997) and Eva Hoffman (2002), who highlight the importance of narrative, understanding, and forgiveness in bridging divides.

The article emphasizes key moments in the novel where Nazneen begins to exercise her agency and reconcile her past with her present. These moments are critical in her transition from a passive participant in her circumstances to an active shaper of her future. The research suggests that Ali's depiction of

Nazneen's evolving identity and sense of belonging illustrates a broader theme of reconciliation essential to the diasporic experience.

Lahiri (2019) analyses the concept of gender trauma in the context of immigration. *Brick Lane* illustrates the psychological and emotional impacts of migration on Nazneen, who grapples with cultural dislocation and gender-based oppression. Lahiri argues that the novel portrays these experiences as deeply intertwined with Nazneen's personal and social identity.

3. Analysis and Discussion

The Greek word *trauma* meaning "wound" may be interpreted in the context of both physical and psychical wounding of an individual. Psychical trauma may be triggered by any catastrophic incidents in life, destruction and war, act of treachery, betrayal and sexual abuse (Heidarizadeh, 2015). Peichl's description of trauma as "a toxic condition, a mixture of intense anxiety, absolute helplessness and a loss of control" (2007, p. 23) may well be applied to defining the diasporic contexts of the immigrants rallying towards economically more advanced part of the world migrating from comparatively less advanced corners such as from countries in South Asian Sub-continent in this context. East London's district Brick Lane in the Borough of Tower Hamlets offered refuge to immigrants for long 400 years. During the late 1950s and early 1960s numerous young male Bengali workers mainly from Sylhet region of Bangladesh (Das, 2013), the then East Pakistan immigrated to London to work in the clothing factories around Brick Lane. With the improvement of their prospects, many brought over their families to this region forming the biggest hub of the Bengali community in diaspora. This "exuberance of immigration" and "the aloofness of expatriation" (Mukherjee, 1990, p. 3) also brought with them identity crisis and culture shock. Along with the issue of identity crisis triggered as an offshoot of migration, "migrant identities are often suffused with traumatic experiences and the attempt to come to terms with them" (Tancke, 2011) and contribute to writing of a saga of intolerable physical as well as psychological sufferings. This paper concentrates on the depiction of psychical wounding which results in subconscious psychological trauma in the female immigrants in *Brick Lane* (2003), a novel written by Monica Ali. In most cases the traumatic experience is caused because of the voluntary but painful immigration performed for the purpose of "so called" changing the social status of the female immigrant and upgrading the overall living condition envisioned by the female immigrant's husband. In most cases in Bangladesh, a woman's course of life is decided by the patriarchs of the family, led by either the father or the son or the husband. Subsequently, the immigration and immigrant life of a woman is also found to be

dictated by the respective patriarchs. Hence, women fall victim to the diaspora-induced crisis and trauma no less than men. According to a demographic study by Samad and Eade (2002) in Tower Hamlets of London, there were more women immigrant than men.

In fact, for the immigrants of any sort, trauma coincides as a byproduct of either compulsory or voluntary dislocation from home to an immigrant milieu. The trauma of displacement (Hron, 2018) from home has always been an important issue in trauma literature. In the present context “home” may be defined as the place of birth and ancestry. In most cases, diasporic writers are haunted by their ancestral homes (Ullah, 2015). However, the female immigrants who are dislocated from comparatively less developed countries of South Asian Sub-continent to the more developed western countries seem to suffer more from multifold trauma which becomes incomprehensible and is ultimately subsided under layers of social impositions created by the conservative notion of nationality (e.g. inflexible stand towards conserving the idea of Bangladeshihood), ethnicity (e.g. Bengali, Chakma etc.), religious perceptions (e.g. Islamic or Hindu ideologies), cultural conformity (Strict social practices/celebrations of festivals e.g. Eid, Puja etc.), gender bias (e.g. prescribed female gender role and male superiority), and economic status (e.g. financially rich, middle class and lower class etc.).

Trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity (Balaev, 2008). The critical factors behind this speechless fright include immigrants’ socio-economic status in their country of origin, their motivations for leaving, the safety of their journey, and the social context where the immigrants arrive (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut, 1991). Literature written in diaspora can aptly depict these critical factors and the layers of social impositions. Monica Ali, a writer in diaspora of Bangladeshi origin, juxtaposed immigrant lives with *deshi* (local) ones in *Brick Lane* (2003) and depicted the inertia-stuck protagonist Nazneen’s silent acceptance of what comes to her life and exposes her exasperated angst which insidiously wriggles its way out through her inner trauma in silence. Here comes the significant role of literature which enables us to bear witness to events that cannot be completely known and might have otherwise remained unspoken and unheard (Caruth, 1996). The lack of expression intensifies the impact of the trauma which goes unwitnessed, unspoken, and unclaimed. Only the female protagonist’s grieving daughter is instrumental to healing the mother’s incomprehensible trauma, who helps combine her mother’s dissociated self and shows her an escape to freedom. Through the ‘collective consciousness’ (Durkheim, 1893) of shared experiences Nazneen’s individual trauma shifts on a socio-cultural dimension and binds her

together with her daughter Shahana, her husband Chanu and her lover Karim because each individual character is psychologically traumatized for essential dislocation from their home of origin. Shahana is traumatized because she cannot live a dual life between simultaneous confrontation of Western and Eastern values and cultures; Chanu is traumatized because he cannot stabilize his struggle for fluctuating financial settlement; Karim is traumatized because of his solidarity to the retaliation victim of 9/11 in the Muslim community in the UK; Nazneen is traumatized as “an unspoilt girl from the village” (Ali, 2003, p. 16) suffering from the crisis of belongingness. She could not fathom the impact of her migration on her life and created a shell of inertia to shut her inner turmoil within herself. She is torn apart into pieces from the inside, coping with her daughter's embarrassment, on one side, and her husband's resentment, on the other. At that precariously tumultuous edge of her life, Karim's intrusion as a soothing resort ignites her subdued desire for independence and ultimate freedom of her choice. The multiphase traumatic experiences for her recur before, during, and after the migration. Being an unspoilt girl from village, she subconsciously struggles to connect to her origin and construct her identities to conform to the new socio-cultural contexts and expectations of the people. In fact, Nazneen's affective and traumatic encounters with Ammu (her mother) help transform Nazneen from an emotionally dependent wife to an independent Bengali woman living in London (Liu, 2014). In this case, her silent trauma in slumber ironically helps find her own self and establish identity.

The acceptance of this trauma and subsequent resolution to it leads to an attitudinal acceptance of the overall abuse experienced by these sorts of dislocated women. Nazneen initially succumbed to the willingness to see, feel, and accept things just as they were, and later, she epiphanically realized her thirst for freedom which was buried in slumber for so long. In an exploratory study, Karim, Zohra, Swahnberg, and Rahman (2023) identified that the attitudinal acceptance of psychological abuse, physical abuse, abuse on disobeying family obligations, and abuse on challenging male authority were significant phenomena which correlated with the mobility of women and trauma by extension. Trauma has always been the byproduct of any type of psychological and physical abuse categorically identified or not (Brewin, et al., 2009; Felitti, et al., 1998; Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk, 2003). Abuse experienced by Nazneen remained undetected which can be characterized as her attitudinal acceptance. Subsequently, her mobility after immigration worked as a catalyst to help identify her freedom and desire that she lacked in her home as well as in diaspora, ultimately leading her to formulate a resolution against the unwanted social impositions and diasporic trauma by reclaiming her identity.

The publicity blurb of *Brick Lane* (Ali, Harper Collins, Doubleday, 2003) endorses Nazneen's unwitnessed hidden trauma when it writes, "Nazneen's inauspicious entry to the world, an apparent stillbirth on the hard mud floor of a Bangladeshi village hut, imbues in her a sense of fatalism that she carries across continents when she is married off to Chanu", (Ali, Harper Collins, 2003, p. 3) a man old enough to be her father. Her subconscious trauma is triggered from a mismatched male entry in her life which is again decided by the society and the traditional norms of an uneducated and backward village context in Bangladesh. "Her life in London's Tower Hamlets is, on the surface, calm" (Ali, Harper Collins, 2003, p.23) but in the rear, a storm of struggles and angst destroys every atom of her "self" the trace of which can occasionally be seen when it peeps to surface for an escape. For her, the psychical trauma operates from the fear of facing the unknown, from the unheard-of insecurity in the new place, from the uncertainty of adjusting to new life, and from the ultimate limbo state for her daughter and herself. "Into that fragile peak, walks Karim. He sets questions before her, of longing and belonging; he sparks in her a turmoil that reflects the community's own; he opens her eyes and directs her gaze..." (Ali, 200, p 35). The numbness of trauma-stricken Naznin is stirred by an agitating as well as subconsciously desired intrusion of an outsider. This escape from the directionless blurry gaze to a fixed course can be considered as the initial stage of the reconciliation (Lahiri, 2019) process of her psychical trauma.

Her foil Hasina also demonstrates an inner trauma though she is not an immigrant but dislocated from her own root. An unknown fear succumbs to her as a source of inner trauma which she declares in a letter to her confidante sister Nazneen, "[I] hardly dare opening my eye. Why it is? What is bringing fear? God not putting me on earth only to suffer. I know this always even when days bringing no light" (Ali, 2003, p. 18). Her unconditional blind trust in instincts only keeps her dissociated self together. Hasina's continuous struggle to forge her way out to establish her own identity is juxtaposed by Nazneen's passive acceptance of the role and identity assigned to her. The process and politics of identity formation and the fundamental threat to identity create a highly significant mental trauma for these Bengali women, immigrant or not. However, the traumatic experience is threefold corrosive for Nazneen: first as a female (gender), second as an immigrant (dislocation from root) and third as an uneducated individual growing out of a backward village in Bangladesh (education and economic condition). This traumatic experience for Nazneen inwardly shatters her into pieces and "undoes the self by breaking the ongoing narrative, severing the connections among remembered past, lived present, and anticipated future" (Brison, 1999, p. 41).

Even after all these adverse experiences of life, Nazneen, a representative figure for Bangladeshi poor female immigrant, struggles in the quest for and formation of her essential identity breaking through the essentialized role, specifically, imposed on women by the chauvinist Bengali society. Her psychic battle to assemble her disassociated self and dilemma in choosing path for herself cause a subsequent inner trauma in her as she lacks any companion for her own soul. Also, "Nazneen, as both a Bangladeshi immigrant and a woman coming from a patriarchal society, inevitably experiences social and psychological alienation (and subsequent trauma) in certain periods of her life" (Arıkan & Koçsoy, 2010). She was alienated from her "self", from the society she settled in and from the society which she left. She was an indifferent lonely sojourner in an indifferent alien planet as

"every person who brushed past her on the pavement, every back she saw, was on a private, urgent mission to execute a precise and demanding plan: to get a promotion today, to be exactly on time for an appointment, to buy a newspaper with the right coins so that the exchange was swift and seamless, to walk without wasting a second and to reach the roadside just as the lights turned red. Nazneen, hobbling and halting, began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination...But they were not aware of her... They knew that she existed ... but unless she did something, waved a gun, halted the traffic, they would not see her..." (Ali, 2003, p. 45).

Nazneen's ethnicity and cultural difference remains invisible as "they would not see her" precisely because it is superfluous to capitalist consumer society of the western world where Nazneen, a girl from backward Bangladeshi village is never a matter of attention which makes her extremely lonely and indifferent. This condition plunged her into a psychological separation from the society although back in her own village in Bangladesh, she was an ordinary girl of no special attention from the society, except from her own family or acquaintances. The psychological condition of her life in London surfaced from a dire absence of collective consciousness (Durkheim, 1893). No shared understanding of social norms or beliefs operate for her as a unifying force (Wren, 2012). However, her lonely life in the East End Tower Hamlets represents a microcosm of poor, overcrowded immigrant life throbbing with working-class Bangladeshis and mostly poor white on welfare in a heterogeneous British urban society (Ferguson, 2015; Hawkins, 2016; Moran & Routh, 2014). Her inner trauma is incomprehensible to her surroundings as she cannot make good friends though

she desires to visit *tatoo* lady. Her conservationist cultural orientation could be held responsible for such reservation in mixing with people. And this extremely lonely and indifferent attitude toward “self” for her uncomfortable transcultural positioning can be equated to the symptoms of a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Falsetti, 1993). This encounter may epitomize her “original traumas” the unavoidably painful constants of the immigrant experience (Tancke, 2011). Suddenly an *epiphanic* realization serves as an outlet for her hidden trauma in mental transformation. She declares:

“Sometimes I look back and I am shocked. Every day of my life I have prepared for success, worked for it, waited for it, and you don't notice how the days pass until nearly a lifetime is finished. Then it hits you--the thing you have been waiting for has already gone by. And it was going in the other direction. It's like I've been waiting on the wrong side of the road for a bus that was already full.” (Ali, 2003)

On the ground of family orientation and socio-cultural conformity, it is seen that the affective and traumatic encounter with her own mother helps transform Nazneen from an emotionally dependent wife to an independent Bengali woman living in London. The absorbed shock from the encounter of her mother’s suicide made her ever stronger and quieter; and subsequently lifeless and inert. Nazneen’s extramarital affair with Karim was another cultural obligation which threw her into the crossroad of dilemma “while she wanted to look neither to her past nor her future, she lived exclusively in both in limbo. They had taken different paths, but they had journeyed, so she realized, together.” (Ali, 2003, p. 143) Her experiences of migration and multiculturalism have a deeply disturbing underground stream that causes the fundamental sense of loss, rootlessness and un-belongingness (Tancke, 2011) which throws her in a state of limbo. She struggles to come out of the social prescription imposed on her to follow as code of life.

“While Nazneen journeys along her path of self-realization, a way haunted by her mother's ghost, her sister Hasina, back in Bangladesh, rushes headlong at her life, first making a "love marriage", then fleeing her violent husband. Woven through the novel, Hasina's letters from Dhaka recount a world of overwhelming adversity. Shaped, yet ultimately not bound, by their landscapes and memories, both sisters struggle to dream themselves out of the rules prescribed for them” (Ali, 2003, p. 228).

At the end of the novel, Nazneen's decision to stay back serves as an escape from her unwanted bonding, in the formation of which she did not have any role. This ever-desired escape initiates her action of reconciliation for her hidden trauma. This *Icarian* escape gives her boost and makes herself vigorous for living a free life because "the energies that are released when we heal from trauma are the wellspring of our creative, artistic, and poetic sensibilities, and they can be summoned to propel us into the wholeness of our intelligence" (Levine, 2005, p 80). So, a post traumatic experience does not only change her as a person, rather creates a new woman out of her fragmented self as "What could not be changed must be borne... This principle ruled her life... So that when, at the age of thirty-four...when for the first time she could not wait for the future to be revealed but had to make it for herself, she was as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye." (Ali, 2003, p. 307) She imagined herself free from any familial injunctions from husband or her own cultural orientation or her mother's up-bringing. So, "suddenly, she was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well." She would be free by shedding her cultural conformity. Now, she is no longer an "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound, domesticated, family oriented, victimized" (The Post-Colonial Reader, p. 261). Her trauma turned out to be her liberator. She decided to detach herself from the despair implanted in her very essence by her own culture and pursued to determine the route of her own life (Tancke, 2011). She decided to stay back and accept the hopes that she saw in her new life denying being the passive part of Chanu's (her husband) mythos of return to homeland. This assimilation can be viewed as a reconciliation to the discontents of diaspora and trauma. This way of her reconciliation simultaneously affected the way she as an immigrant looked back towards her native culture.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the trauma in the female migrant Nazneen that Monica Ali projects in *Brick Lane* is a byproduct of voluntary immigration to London from Bangladesh. This trauma is not physical by nature rather psychological imposed and inflicted on a woman by her surroundings triggered from her expected gender role, dislocation from the root, lack of education and poor economic condition of the family. In some cases, the society does not directly impose burdens on women, rather it cajoles the women's infinitely adoptive mind to accept the unwanted restrictions and burden of responsibilities. Nazneen's consent to follow the father's decision about her marriage to a man who is old enough to be her father and go to London after the mother's suicide, was a social imposition of an unwanted burden on her which created a traumatic effect on her.

Even her female self-identity is changed into other self, performed, and actualized over time within the social constraints (Suzuki, 2010). The fourteen years of her programmed life with her husband Chanu in Tower Hamlets epitomizes the symptoms of her unwitnessed trauma. Her mother's suicide, her sister's elopement and subsequent struggling life, her husband Chanu's unsettlement and mythos of returns, her daughter's confusion in living a dual life were directly or indirectly the causes of her ultimate trauma in immigrant life, and as a solution to this, her encounter with Karim helped her overcome the trauma positively with the discovery of her identity and freedom.

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