

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

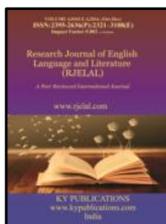
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

PROBLEMS OF PARENTING AND GROWING CHILDREN IN DIASPORIC COMMUNITY:
STUDYING FAMILY RELATIONS IN MONICA ALI'S *BRICK LANE*

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ABSTRACT

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* very vividly describes the bicultural upbringing of the children in the diasporic community living in Brick Lane – situated in London – basically inhabited by people from South-Asian countries. It depicts a community where the parents or adults start up their life in an alien country as an outsider and struggle to relocate and adjust in the new, hybrid culture they have become a part of. The acculturation of children born and growing up in such hybrid conditions is obvious and inevitable. The children readily accept the host country as their own; but the parents always want their children to inculcate their own nationality while they are at home in the host country. The children can and they do mix up and adapt themselves to the world of the host land more freely than their parents. For the children, the home means the host country. *Brick Lane* describes the anxiety of the parents as they always fear that they might not imbibe or forget their own cultural values and get contaminated living the life of hybridization. The book takes up the issue of what the parents think constitutes cultural purity and what actually the children inculcate in a hybridized environment and their concern regarding their contamination. The child in the diasporic community mixes more easily with the community as he does not have any memory of the country they come from but their parents impose their anxiety on them for they do not have control over their child's acculturation. As a result, the child may feel constricted within his home and there can be instances of rebellion. These children within the diasporic community show more instances of explicit anger, violence and irreverence than the children of the homeland. Therefore, through the lives of Nazneen, Chanu, and their daughters, and some other diasporic characters Monica Ali illustrates the problems of acculturation and their gradual acceptance of such hybrid existence.

Key Words: Diaspora, migration, hybridization, acculturation, nationhood and child

Introduction and Discussion

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* very vividly describes the life of a Bangladeshi village woman, Nazneen, who is sent off to settle in London after being married to Chanu, a man double her age. Nazneen depicts the typical life of a diasporic individual stuck between the two worlds – her

native land, Bangladesh, and the host land, England. Nazneen belongs to that group of expatriates who leave their native land not out of their own volition but because of their marriage to a native living in a foreign land. Contrary to Nazneen's circumstances, Chanu came to London on his own accord to complete his studies and find a respectable work.

Though the circumstances where different for both of them, longing for one's native country while stationed at another can be found in both of them. In the initial years of her stay in London Nazneen takes up her responsibility as a homemaker with utmost care and earnestness. She fits within the house in Brick Lane in the role of a home-maker with complete ease and looks after the family with complete sincerity. But her problem lies in adjusting with the people outside her house and she finds living in London difficult, among alien people who speak a language she is not acquainted with. Furthermore, the situation for Chanu is no different and though he is more aware and exposed to the world beyond the alleys of Brick Lane he is portrayed as an immigrant who strongly adheres to his native roots and culture. Apparently, it seems that it would be easier for Chanu to acculturate himself in the host land as Nazneen continually remembers her past life in Bangladesh and longs for that life in her homeland. Monica Ali incorporates a narrative style where Nazneen is shown to remain in connection to her native land through letters her sister, Hasina sends her. Through Hasina's letter Nazneen comes to know about the social and political condition of Bangladesh and it is these letters that bind Nazneen to her motherland. Even while possessing such a strong attachment for her country it is Nazneen who is ready to slowly inculcate the mode of life in London. With the gradual unfolding of the story we observe the development of a new Nazneen, who slowly and surprisingly blends and adjusts to the life in the host land with ease.

Brick Lane takes up the issue of the native people's struggle to locate themselves in a new land, their problems of living with a mixed, hybrid identity and continuous endeavour to hold on to their family tradition and values while experiencing a new found freedom. The problems generally rise due to the unwillingness of the expatriates to change or adjust themselves according to the customs and ways of the host land and how they are continuously reminded of their social, religious and cultural background. Memory plays a very crucial role in the diasporic condition, for it "exists precisely because it remembers the homeland" and "the people of

diaspora, however, do not merely settle in new countries: they recreate in their socio-economic, political and cultural institutions a version of . . . that homeland that they remember" (qtd. in Rai and Reeves 1). Even when the problem of accepting a new culture as their own is more prominent among the adults who leave their home on their own wish to find better job and life, the children born to such immigrants experience a predicament where they are stuck between the two cultures. While the migrated parents try to adhere to their traditions of native place and wish to inculcate similar values among their children, the children born in the host country accepts this country as their own and their willingness to belong to the host country is more pronounced. The acculturation of children born and growing up in such hybrid conditions is obvious and inevitable. The children readily accept the host country as their own; but the parents always want their children to inculcate their own nationality while they are at home in the host country. The children can and they do mix up and adapt themselves to the world of the host land more freely than their parents. For the children, the home means the host country. These children have never seen their native land and therefore cannot build in themselves that sense of nationality which their parents want to put in them. They cannot identify themselves with the native nation and find it difficult to relate with their parents' instruction to instill the values of their home country and develop an intense knowledge regarding their native nation's history. The problematical areas are the disputes which arise among the two generations when they clash on the point of choosing between beliefs and mores of a nation which they regard as their homeland and the nation which is giving them shelter now.

Such a cultural space which echoes diasporic consciousness and problematic can be traced in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* too. The story of Nazneen and Chanu and their two daughters, Bibi and Sahana portrays a close-knit Bangladeshi family living in the Brick lane of London and going through the hardships and hassles of living in a country with a different culture, manner and language. The story depicts the anxiety of the parents who always fear

that their children might forget to imbibe their own cultural values and get drawn towards living the life of the people from the host land. The novel presents instances which show the high expectations of the parents, who want their children to behave and practice a way of life which is followed at their native place. During a conversation while having dinner with Chanu, Dr. Azad, refers to the condition of second generation diasporic children and tells how they are “copying what they see here, going to the pub, to nightclubs. Or drinking at home in their bedrooms where their parents think they are perfectly safe” (Ali 29). This gives rise to anxiety among the parents from Bangladeshi community as they cannot imagine their children behaving or acting like the Westerners. Only solution that Chanu can think of is returning to their homeland before such influences start having any impact on to his children. But it is easier said than done, for such immigrants could never accommodate enough money to afford returning to their native country. The acculturation of children is inevitable in a mixed, hybrid society but the parents expect their children to stay away from mixing with the children of other community. A chance visit of Chanu and Nazneen to Dr. Azad’s house brings before us a picture of a diasporic house where Azad’s wife and daughter has easily assimilated with the Western culture. Azad’s daughter wears short skirts, speaks in English, chews gum and goes to the pub, much to his disagreement and displeasure. In short, she is nothing like the child hailing from the Bangladeshi community is expected to be like. Chanu very vividly points out to the problems that arise because of this interaction between the culture of the host land and the native land. He talks about “the clash between the Western values” and their own, “the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one’s identity and heritage”, “about children who don’t know what their identity is”, “about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent”, “about the terrific struggle to preserve one’s sanity while striving to achieve the best for one’s family” (Ali 95). *Brick Lane* intricately portrays the apprehension of the parents regarding their children in such an environment which they consider can have an adverse effect in their growing up days and

can distance them from their native traditions and culture. Therefore, the novel takes up the issue of what the parents think constitutes cultural purity and what actually the children inculcate in a hybridized environment.

The second generation diasporic children mixes more easily with the people of the host land as he or she is more accustomed to their behavior and manners, unlike their parents who are the first generation migrants and face difficulty in becoming one among them. These children have never been to their native land and therefore does not possess any memory of the country their parents have come from, as a result they do not experience any cultural shock while assimilating themselves among the people of the host land, but these first generation parents are worried about the construction of an identity which is based on an amalgamation of two diverse cultures. When Nazneen gave birth to Raqib, Chanu was a proud father who desired to give proper education to Raqib and planned to leave London and return to his native land, Dhaka, so that he remains out of any “danger” of turning alcoholic or imbibe any uncalled for customs and culture of the host land. But with Raqib’s death, Chanu’s aspiration dies. Then Nazneen gave birth to two daughters, Shahana and Bibi. As the age of his daughters increased, Chanu’s anxiety related to their upbringing increases and he decides to return to Bangladesh. Both the girls are different in their behaviour and approach towards their parents as well as towards the society they are a part of. Bibi is more resigned and accepting as she listens to what her parents tell her, but Shahana is more rebellious and possesses an inquisitive mind. She is not ready to accept any instruction from Chanu without complete explanation and reasoning. And for Chanu, Shahana was a disappointment as she never acted according to his instructions and never showed any inclination to learn the traditions and rituals of her native country. She preferred her life in England and seems to have blended smoothly with her present life. For her London was her home and she:

did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans. She hated her kameez If she could choose between

baked beans and dal, it was no contest. When Bangladesh was mentioned she pulled a face. She did not know and would not learn that Tagore was more than poet and Nobel laureate, and no less than the true father of her nation. Shahana did not care. Shahana did not want to go back home. (Ali 146-147)

Therefore, Shahana belongs to that group of children who have accepted their present land of birth as their own and mixes more easily with the community. And it is easier for her to accept London as her home for she is having the firsthand experience of living there and learning through observation; but with respect to her native land, Dhaka, whatever she learns is only through hearing about it from her parents and thus she can have respect for the place but can never relate with it. She is interacting with the locals of London regularly and as a result she identifies herself as one among them. But immigrated parents like Chanu expect their children to learn the culture and tradition of their native place in such a manner that they are able to retain a sense of nationality in their mind when they are in their home but far away from their homeland. As Susheila Nasta observes how the "seductive power of 'home'" operates "both as a force for authority *over* and as a continuing domestic metaphor for maintaining a means of authority *within*" (1). Similar kind of authority can be found in the way Chanu is trying to rear his children where he is shown to frequently reach a point of frustration and vehemence when Shahana denies to or rebel against following his words regarding learning about the history, culture and manners of their native country. One episode from the novel, *Brick Lane*, portrays such an expression of anger and infliction of punishment by Chanu on his daughter when she refuses to sing 'Golden Bengal' song. 'Golden Bengal' or 'O Amar Shonar Bangla' is the National Anthem of Bangladesh and Chanu wanted his daughters to learn and recite the song to him after practicing for some days. While Bibi tried to recite the song with little difficulty it is Shahana who refuses to sing it. The mannerism with which Bibi sings the song shows that she is singing the song more out of fear than from any sense of nationality

for the song or the country: "Her voice gave no hint of joy or thrill. It plodded nervously along, afraid that a sudden burst of intonation would derail the train of recall" (Ali 133). But when Shahana's turn came to recite the song "she had her arms folded across her chest and her top lip tucked into the bottom lip" (Ali 134). These kinds of behaviour incited Chanu's anger and he would start thrashing Shahana with whatever came in his hand:

"Tell the little memsahib that I am going to break every bone in her body." Chanu never addressed his threats directly to his elder daughter. Nazneen was the preferred intermediary or, if a new and particularly lurid threat had been invented, Bibi would be chosen. "I'll dip her head in boiling fat and throw her out of that window. Go and tell the memsahib. Go and tell your sister." (Ali 134)

The antagonism Chanu expresses comes from the fear of losing one's own child in the hands of a different and alien culture and mode of living. And Shahana's rebellious attitude comes from an understanding that London is her home and she is unable to accept a place she has never seen as her own. Second generation immigrants like Shahana experiences and learns from two forms of lives: outside the home and another, at home. While interacting with different cultures they are exposed to variety of experiences which results in their growth, but at home, they are always reminded of their native land through their cultural songs, religious books, history and tradition. Therefore, Chanu's endeavour in making them aware of Tagore and his poems his way of educating his children about their native land. In such a diasporic space, these immigrants undergo transformation and that "enables the growth of 'new identities and subjectivities', new alliances which exist 'outside what has been called the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference'" (Nasta 7). Therefore, for such a diasporic generation like Shahana, who does not own any specific history or culture, imbibes the life of both the cultures and create a hybrid existence for themselves with a new identity.

For Chanu and Nazneen – the diasporic individuals who live on meager salary and experience hardships in an alien land – the anxieties of uprootedness, rootlessness, de-nationality or deracination becomes more prominent when they have to rear their children in a land away from their motherland. These anxieties grow each and every day with the growth of their children because here they do not have control over their child's acculturation as the parents cannot control and restrict their interaction with the native children. On a day when Dr Azad came to Chanu's home for dinner and they sat conversing about the condition of expatriates like them and the problem they face in educating their children in the native land. Chanu believes that only parents can educate their children properly about their history and culture inside the home and he cannot trust what these children are learning in English schools.

The diasporic individual lives in the host land with the thought that as they are working there it would add some meaning to their existence and provide a reason to live in the land but yet they are constantly reminded of the home they had left behind. But for the second generation children, there is no memory of the country they come from, and accepts and acknowledges the host land as their own. Therefore the problems of child-rearing are more difficult in the host land as the parents continuously impose their anxiety on them and expect their children to behave and follow the culture and tradition like a child they have seen in their homeland. But, this continuous juggle between the home and the world leaves these children bewildered and their frustration comes out in the form of displeasure and hostility towards the parents. Various experiences that these children become part of while living in the host land only results in an increase in their desire to belong and get accepted in the community they interact with daily; but the parents expect to retain their cultural purity by creating a part of the homeland they remember within the periphery of the house. As a result, the child may start to feel constricted within his home and there is seen certain instances of rebellion. Shahana has a disregard for speaking in her native language inside the household as she

believes English to be her own language. Even she shows few instances of defiance where she yells at her parents and say that: "I didn't ask to be born here" (Ali 147). These children within the diasporic community show more instances of explicit anger, violence and irreverence than the children of the homeland. Initially Chanu plans to take his family back to Bangladesh before it is too late. But his daughters and Nazneen does not wish to leave London as they have settled and created a niche of their own in the host land. Therefore at the end we observe that it is Chanu who could not become a part of this alien culture and returns home with the hope for a better life. Nazneen and the daughters remain in London as they had acculturated themselves with the host land and had found freedom, an individual identity and the courage to work independently in England – the things they could never have imagined in Bangladesh. Thus, finally we see how Monica Ali shows the gradual acceptance of their hybrid existence where they try to inculcate the mores and traditions of the host land while still retaining their nativity.

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