
A Socio-Cultural Study of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

Samhita Singh, Research Scholar, Department of English, Govt. D.B. Girls' PG Autonomous College, Raipur (CG).

Dr Jaya Tiwari, Professor & Head, Department of English, Govt. D.B. Girls' PG Autonomous College, Raipur (CG).

Paper Received on 13-07-2024, Accepted on 11-08-2024
Published on 13-08-24; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2024.9.3.237

Abstract

Monica Ali is a towering figure in the field of literature. Her debut novel, *Brick Lane* (2003), explores Nazneen's journey towards self-realization. Monica Ali's 'Alentejo Blue' (2006) is a collection of short stories that discuss the psyche of immigrants living in a small town in rural Portugal. The novel 'In the Kitchen' (2009) deals with the life of an executive chef called Gabriel Lightfoot. Ali's 'Untold Story' (2011) is a novel that addresses how Princess Diana had staged her own accident so that she could live an undiscovered life in a small American town. Monica Ali's latest novel, 'Love Marriage' (2022), explores cultural diversity in Britain. This research paper is an attempt to explore Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, considering socio-cultural aspects. It will highlight various socio-cultural aspects such as language, racial discrimination, portrayal of women, marriage, family, and cultural identity.

Keywords: Brick Lane; Cultural Identity; Family; Language; Racial Discrimination

Introduction

Monica Ali, born in the year 1967, is a British writer of Bangladeshi and English descent. She studied philosophy, politics, and economics at Wadham College, Oxford. In 2003, *Granta Magazine* selected her as one of the "Best Young British Novelists". Her debut novel *Brick Lane* (2003) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for fiction. It explores the journey of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi immigrant in Britain, and her struggle to establish an identity of her own. *Alentejo Blue*, published in 2006, is a collection of short stories that brings to light the psyche of immigrants residing in the Alentejo province of Portugal. Ali's *In the Kitchen* (2009) explores the life of an executive chef at the Imperial Hotel in London, Gabriel

Lightfoot. Untold Story (2011) is based on a known celebrity, Princess Diana, and how she staged her accident to live a content life in a small American town. Monica Ali's latest novel, *Love Marriage* (2022), deals with cultural diversity in Britain.

This research paper attempts to study the socio-cultural aspect of Monica Ali's debut novel *Brick Lane*. It centers around the character of Nazneen, who was married off at a very young age to a person doubling her age. She struggled hard to find a place for herself as she was busy trying to emerge as an ideal woman, which society aims for. Nazneen turned out to be a good wife and a mother, but she never gained respect from anyone, not even from her lover Karim. In this literary work, Ali portrays Nazneen's journey and transformation from a suppressed woman to an independent one.

The novel is replete with several themes, such as racial discrimination, language, portrayal of women, religious beliefs, marriage, and familial bonding. These thematic representations mark the essence of the novel and earned great accolades from the critics. *Brick Lane* was originally titled Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers, which is a literal translation of a Bengali idiom. In this novel, Monica Ali traces the plight of women in a patriarchal setup, focusing her attention on Nazneen and other female characters in the novel. The present study will analyze the novel, taking into consideration various cultural factors, namely language, ethnicity, portrayal of women, racial discrimination, and familial bonding.

Discussion

'Language' plays a significant role in *Brick Lane*. Monica Ali in *Brick Lane* has portrayed how Nazneen, after getting married to Chanu Ahmed, struggled to adapt herself in London as her communicative ability was weak in terms of speaking in the English language. In his analysis of *Brick Lane*, John Mullan writes in his article 'Foreign Thoughts' that it is a "novel written in one language but supposed to be taking place in another. *Brick Lane* comes to us as if it were a work of translation. We have to imagine that most of its characters are talking in Bengali, even though the dialogue is presented to us in clear English." (34) Monica Ali has made use of modern English to express Bengali emotions. The difficulty that Nazneen faces in having a smooth conversation with her neighbors shows that the English language is a foreign tongue to her. "Nazneen could say two things in English: sorry and thank you. She could spend another day alone. It was only another day" (Ali, 2004, 19). Monica Ali has also brought forward the difficulty that many Bengali-speaking individuals face when they try to communicate in the English language. One instance was when Nazneen was watching an ice skating performance on the television and asked her husband about it, but she had difficulty pronouncing the word ice skating. "... Ice skating, she said with deliberation. Chanu smiled. Don't worry about it. It's a common problem for Bengalis. Two consonants together cause difficulty. I have

conquered this issue after a long time. But you are unlikely to need these words in any case" (Ali, 2004, 37).

Another aspect of language can be seen when Chanu Ahmed is trying to forcefully impose Bengali traditions on his daughters Shahana and Bibi. "O Amar Shonar Bangla, Ami tomay bhailobashi/Forever your skies, your air set my heart in tune... For five days, he taught his daughters to recite 'Golden Bengal.' This evening, they were to perform the entire poem. Chanu was taking his family back home, and Tagore was the first step of the journey" (Ali, 2004, 178-79). Since Chanu Ahmed was a well-educated individual, he preferred to show off his skills wherever he got a chance. In the first half of the novel, Chanu is shown as a self-obsessed individual who has a fascination for Western Culture and willingly detaches his family from Bengali traditions; however, in the second half of the narrative, he adopts Bengali traditions and deliberately tries to impose them on his daughters. Chanu's forceful temperament creates a rift between him and Shahana, and this can be seen as a clash between the first and second generations.

'Ethnicity' plays a vital role in the life of an individual. It serves as an individual's cultural identity. Ethnicity determines where a particular person belongs. Monica Ali, in her literary text *Brick Lane*, has provided a glimpse of Sylhetis, an ethnocultural group that is mostly associated with the Sylhet region in South Asia. Chanu Ahmed, in the initial chapter of the novel, presented a description of Sylhetis, focusing mostly on their qualities. "... most of our people here are Sylhetis. They all stick together because they come from the same district. They know each other from the villages, and they come to Tower Hamlets, and they think they are back in the village..." (Ali, 2004, 28). Another instance where ethnicity is discussed is when Chanu Ahmed was defending the Muslims. He had a conflict with his daughter, to which he said, "... Who was it who saved the work of Plato and Aristotle for the West during the Dark Ages? Us. It was us. Muslims..." (Ali, 2004, 215)

Monica Ali in *Brick Lane* portrays female characters as strong individuals. *Brick Lane* centers around Nazneen, who was married off at a younger age to a person double her age, and her struggle to adapt herself to an entirely different kind of environment and Culture, but it is also about Nazneen's transition from a subjugated individual to an independent individual. Since her childhood, Nazneen has been taught to be tolerant and always listen to her husband. In her entire life, Nazneen played the role of an ideal wife and an ideal mother. She never went against the wishes of her husband, Chanu Ahmed. Nazneen wasn't content with her marriage, which is why she had an extra-marital relationship, but soon she realized it wasn't right, so she ended her relationship with Karim. Due to the ongoing tensions between communities, it was decided that they would return to Bangladesh, but due to a shortage of money, Nazneen worked as a seamstress. She later decided she wouldn't go back and would stay in London with her daughters. "No, she breathed. She lifted

his head and looked into his face. It was dented and swollen, almost out of recognition. 'I can't go with you,' she said" (Ali, 2004, 478).

Hasina, Nazneen's sister, has been projected in a different manner by Monica Ali. Hasina, right from the beginning, has been of a rebellious nature who took control of her own life and, upon reaching the age of sixteen, eloped with her lover Malek. But Hasina's marriage with Malek didn't work well as he was abusive. Hasina, for quite some time, dealt with it patiently, but when things got worse, she left Malek and fled to Narayanganj. Hasina was in constant touch with Nazneen through a series of letters in which she narrated everything about her life. In her letters, Hasina narrated about her observations regarding the disparities between men and women. "Everything good between us now. I do not let my tongue make trouble for it, as my husband says. Just because a man is kind to his wife does not mean she can say what she likes. If women understand this, no one will beat them" (Ali, 2004, 25).

Mrs. Islam, a neighbor of Nazneen, is portrayed as a ruthless usurer who lends people money but charges heavy interest instead. She is well-equipped with all sorts of knowledge about every person living in Tower Hamlets. For Chanu, Mrs Islam was a respectable woman. He, too, had borrowed money from Mrs Islam to buy a sewing machine for Nazneen and a computer for himself. Mrs Islam is a person who believes in preserving one's Culture. In the first chapter, when Mrs. Islam and Razia are talking about a fellow neighbor, Jorina, she detests the idea of Jorina mingling with all sorts of people and trading with her Culture. She said, "Mixing with all sorts: Turkish, English, Jewish. All sorts. I am not old-fashioned, said Mrs. Islam. I don't wear burkha. I keep purdah in my mind, which is the most important thing..." (Ali, 2004, 29). Mrs Islam also holds the view that if women want to get something, she must act accordingly. When she took Nazneen to Dr Azad for a pre-natal check-up, she narrated a story from her childhood where women took some strong measures to get their husbands to do the job of fetching water from the well. "If you think you are powerless, then you are. Everything is within you, where God put it. If your husband does not do what is required, think what you yourself have left undone" (Ali, 2004, 65-66).

Razia Iqbal is another strong character portrayed by Monica Ali in *Brick Lane*. She is Nazneen's neighbor, and she regards passing rumors as a national pastime. She is a mother to Tariq and Shefali and is also described as a mimic and a big bony clown. Razia also decided to learn English so that she could spank her children if they cracked dirty jokes behind her back. She herself told Nazneen, "Do you know why I'm going to learn English? said Razia as she was leaving. So that when my children start telling dirty jokes behind my back, I'll be able to whip their backsides" (Ali, 2004, 74). Razia is also depicted as a person who is breaking the stereotypical Muslim dress code and adopting English ways to open a new dimension of life. After the demise of her husband, she took the job of a seamstress to support

her children and started wearing sweatshirts over elastic-waisted trousers. "Since gaining her British passport, she had acquired a sweatshirt with a large Union Jack printed on the front, and in a favorite combination paired it with brown elastic-waisted trousers" (Ali, 2004, 188).

Since Culture comprises several communities, discrimination based on caste, creed, Culture, and religion has become quite evident. Many communities, in order to maintain their superiority, discriminate and torment people of other communities based on their caste, race, and religion. Monica Ali in *Brick Lane* portrays racial discrimination through the character Chanu Ahmed. Chanu Ahmed was a well-educated person who lived in Tower Hamlets in London. He works for a local council and is sure with the fact that soon he will get a promotion, but all his hopes are shattered when someone else gets the promotion. Monica Ali reveals that Chanu, at a point in time, became certain that he won't get any promotion because of the color of his skin. This thought has been expressed by Nazneen in the following lines:

"My husband says they are racist, particularly Mr Dalloway. He thinks he will get a promotion, but it will take him longer than any white man. He says that if he painted his skin pink and white, then there would be no problem." (Ali, 2004, 72)

Chanu Ahmed had gone through so much racial discrimination that he no longer made any future plans and was down with heavy grief. This aspect has been highlighted by Fakhare Alam in his research paper titled, 'Racism: A Study of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*.' He stated that "Constant experience of racial discrimination and humiliation leaves Chanu on the verge of depression and disappointment" (Alam 135). Monica Ali projected disappointment of Chanu Ahmed in the following lines: "He stopped making plans... Before that, each collapse of ambition, though it dented his surface, had goaded him to new determination, a more urgent reaching. He started every new job with a freshly spruced suit and a growling collection of pens. His face shone with hope. And then greyed with frustration, with resentment... But he was slighted. By customers, suppliers, superiors, and inferiors. He worked hard for respect, but he could not find it." (Ali, 2004, 203)

Another example from *Brick Lane* where one can find the inferiority and superiority among different races is when Nazneen is doing the dishes in the kitchen and Chanu starts a conversation. He spoke about how white people get annoyed when they see a person with a dark complexion getting ahead of them:

'You see,' he said, a frequent opener although often she did not see, 'it is the white underclass, like Wilkie, who are most afraid of people like me. To him, and people like him, we are the only thing standing in the way of them sliding totally to the bottom of the pile. As long as we are below them, then they are above something. If they see us rise, then they are resentful because we have left our proper place. That is why you get the phenomenon of the National Front. They can play on those fears

to create racial tensions and give these people a superiority complex. The middle classes are more secure and therefore more relaxed.' (Ali, 2004, 38)

Family plays an important role in the life of an individual. It is the backbone and strength of a person. Monica Ali in *Brick Lane* has discussed the concept of 'familial bonding' in an efficient manner. Familial bonding can be seen in the relationship between the main protagonist, Nazneen, and her mother, Rupban. When Nazneen was born, she wasn't breathing. Banesa, the midwife, had put forth two options before Rupban; one was to take Nazneen to the hospital, and the other was to leave Nazneen to her fate. Rupban chose the second option to make her child strong. "...we must not stand in the way of Fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate. That way, she will be stronger" (Ali, 2004, 14).

Familial bonding can also be seen in the relationship between Nazneen and Hasina. Both are sisters and are in touch with each other through a series of letters which correspond between the two. In the letters, Hasina mostly speaks about her life, her struggles, her pain, and her sufferings, and she even wishes Nazneen luck in a better life ahead. One can also find familial bonding between Nazneen and her daughters Shahana and Bibi. Shahana and Bibi helped their mother in learning English. Dr. Latha S., in her text *Three Diaspora Women Writers: Monica Ali, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Taslima Nasreen* (2021) has commented, "Nazneen along with her teenage daughters Shahana and Bibi tries to assimilate the world around her to accommodate the children by changing herself" (S, Latha, 2021, 107).

Another instance of familial bonding can be seen in the relationship between Nazneen and Chanu Ahmed. Nazneen was married off to Chanu at a very young age. After marriage, they settled in London, and Nazneen was confined to doing only household chores. She once overheard Chanu on the phone saying that he married Nazneen only because she was an unspoiled village girl. Nazneen felt that Chanu only talks but never acts. But when her son Raqib was admitted to the hospital, her relationship with Chanu became sweeter. Chanu took good care of Nazneen when Raqib was ill. He brought food from the house, and the time they both spent at the hospital made Nazneen understand Chanu better. She started feeling that her father had chosen a good match for her. "Abba did not choose so badly. This was not a bad man. There were many bad men in the world, but this was not one of them. She could love him. Perhaps she did already. She thought she did. And if she didn't, she soon would because now she understood what he was and why. Love would follow understanding" (Ali, 2004 120-121).

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can say that *Brick Lane* showcases the significance of Culture as well as societal prospects in an effective manner. Various cultural aspects such as language, ethnicity, racial discrimination, suppression of women, familial

Research Journal Of English (RJOE)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal Impact Factor: 8.16(SJIF)Vol-9, Issue-3,2024
Indexed in: International Citation Indexing (ICI), Cite factor, International Scientific Indexing (ISI),
Directory of Research Journal Indexing (DRJI) Google Scholar, Cosmos and Internet Archives.

bonding, and marriage forms the base of the novel and make it worth exploring. The importance of Culture is inbuilt in the novel and Monica Ali has justified every aspect of it in a remarkable manner.

References

- Alam, Fakhare. February 2017. "Racism: A Study of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*." *International Journal of English Language, Literature, Humanities*, Vol. 5, Issue II, pp. 132–144.
- Ali, Monica. 2004. *Brick Lane*. Black Swan.
- Choudhary, Ankita. 2020. "A Study of the Cross-Cultural Language Issues in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*." *Dialog*, Issue no. 35, pp. 01–09.
- Mullan, John. 29 May 2004. "Foreign Thoughts." *The Guardian*., pp. 34.
- S., Dr Latha. 2021. *Three Diaspora Women Writers: Monica Ali, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Taslima Nasrin*. Prestige Books International.
- Sharma, Dr Eva. 2017. "Shifting Cultures: Diaspora in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*." *International Journal of Research, Volume 04 (Issue14)*, pp. 2677–2680.

How to cite this article?

Samhita Singh & Dr Jaya Tiwari " A Socio-Cultural Study of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*"
Research Journal Of English (RJOE)9(3),PP:231-237,2024,
DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2024.9.3.237