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**RESIDING ON THE PERIPHERY: UNRAVELING THE DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS
IN BRICK LANE BY MONICA ALI**

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Abstract:

We are all migrants through time said Mohsin Hamid. Brick Lane by Monica Ali presents us with the convincing account of an expatriate and his family confined in a foreign land. Immanuel Wallenstein has propounded in the World System Analysis, that the root cause of migration is the unmatched development in the nations which trigger an urge among immigrants to relocate in the hope of a better future. Chanu is a Sylheti Bangladeshi who is tempted by the chances of upward mobility and diverse opportunities that London seemed to offer, and therefore he migrates to Brick Lane alias Banglatown. Nazneen his wife has experienced double migration, she not only had to leave her paternal household but she also had to resettle in London with only two words at her convenience “sorry “ and “thank you “.

Exposed to the host land Chanu’s dreams face unwelcomed consequences both due to his own inhibitions and the non-acceptance on the part of the host nation. The Sylhetis are ridiculed in the new community of the Occident and looked down upon as the other. Chanu desperately

tries to assimilate into the mainstream culture by imitating their mannerisms. Homi Bhabha in the Location of Culture has elucidated the theory of mimicry, where the colonized subject imitates the colonizers. Chanu’s failure in subsiding his colonized psyche hinders him to refashion his entity. He is attacked by bouts of going home syndrome under the fear of dissolution. The double consciousness entrenched in him leads to generational conflict as he constantly tries to thrust orthodox Bengali customs on his daughters who flaunt sheer negligence of it. Nazneen constricted in the claustrophobic ethnic ghetto community in London yearns for freedom and intimacy; she wants to shun the fatalistic passivity engendered within her by the conservative Bengali society.

The socio-political scenario of Bangladesh is adequately conveyed through the letters of Hasina. Toni Morrison has coined the term “remember” to designate the memories of the past, which resurge in the present, prohibiting any attempt of integration. Chanu and Nazneen are interrupted by the nostalgic memories of the past obliterating their constant

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assimilations efforts. The couple part ways undergoing disparate epiphany realization in the foreign culture, however, the novel ends on a note of optimism and a possibility of cultural miscegenation.

Keywords: expatriate, migration, occident, colonized psyche, ghetto community, rememorize

Brick Lane is a novel that has sparked controversy after its publication for the presentation of an awakening female. The novel acquaints us, and helps us to plunge into the abyss of South Asian Bangladeshi culture. Nazneen the protagonist is born in 1967 in Gauripur Mymensingh district. Despite of being threatened with immense complication during Nazneen's birth, her mother had left her to her fate. Kate Millet in her seminal work Sexual Politics has aptly commented that personal relationships should be seen as a political site. It is in within the four walls of the household, perpetuated by the family that the subjugation of women begins. Nazneen's mother tries to inculcate within her the apparent need to surrender herself to fate, and warns her of the devastating consequences of interfering with it. In South Asian tradition, a woman is expected to be a diligent and dutiful forbearer of Culture. It is under the

influence of Nazneen's mother that Nazneen has succeeded in becoming the passive soul, unquestioningly surrendering to the welfare of the family: "It was because of her mother's wise decision that Nazneen lived to become the wide-faced, watchful girl she was. Fighting against one's Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, or perhaps most times, it can be fatal".(Ali) Nazneen meekly follows her mother's conviction and gets ready to marry a man that her father has chosen despite the man being double of her age : "Not once did Nazneen question the logic of the story of How You Were Left To your Fate". (Ali)

Chanu Ahmed, Nazneen's husband is forty years of age, has completed a degree in English literature at Dhaka University tempted and triggered by the dreams of upward mobility migrates to London's East End alias Bangla town. Immanuel Wallerstein has propounded in World System Analysis that the root cause of migration is the unmatched development in the nations. Enthralled by the unlimited prospects the city seemed to offer and dreadful of the constant threat of natural catastrophe plaguing Bangladesh he decides to abandon his homeland for a foreign land. Belonging to a conventional Bengali Muslim family, where the institution of marriage of convenience is a rampant practice, Nazneen is married off to Chanu. Nazneen faces double migration; she not

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only has to leave her paternal household but also her native land.

One is not born rather becomes a woman (De Beauvoir), in South Asian families the women are considered as moral mentors of their children and expected to preserve their family's honor from infamy. It is the women especially, the mother who is accused for any kind of adversity that befalls on the family. Patriarchy is like the transcendental signifier (Derrida), and decisions in the family are convened by the ultimate patriarchal figure. Nazneen doesn't protest against the societal norms that make her confined in the private claustrophobic space, she obediently follows her mother's warning "If God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men". A quintessential Bangladeshi family demanded that a woman must perceive herself first as a wife and then a mother and never as an individual. The act of self extinction committed by Nazneen's mother owes its existence to the illicit relationship of her father with another woman. Left with no substantial mode to break away from the marriage, which would be considered sacrilegious, she chooses to end the excruciating pain through suicide. As a belief very native to indigenous South Asian culture, women are expected to give birth to sons as a major contribution towards the family. The penchant for birthing sons is the impact of the strongly held belief, which they carry on the family

lineage, while the girls are married off. The felicity in the marriage of Chanu and Nazneen begins to evaporate soon after the death of their son, as if he was the binding force between them.

Although Chanu has lived in the westernized atmosphere for sixteen prolonged years, he hasn't forgotten his cultural roots. He impersonates the typical patriarchal figure, and doesn't allow Nazneen to step out of the threshold providing her the ostensible reason of his dread of losing her: "She did not go out"; "Why should you go out? (Ali). He superficially asserts his influence on her by belittling her with the taunts "It is lucky for you that you married an educated man. That was a stroke of luck".(Ali). Relegated to the private demesne in the ghetto community of Brick Lane, she is prey to both bigotry and sexism. Recalcitrant of her stagnant disposition, Nazneen yearns to explore the Western world. Her penchant towards cultural is expressed in her fascination of the middle aged lady covered in tattoos, nonchalantly smoking and drinking through the flat across her window : "The woman looked up and saw Nazneen staring. She smiled, like she was smiling at someone who had tried and totally failed to grasp the situation" (Ali). Nazneen feels incarcerated; this crippling mundane isolation stings her. Michel Foucault in Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison has drawn upon Jeremy Bentham's

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Panopticon and poignantly noted that the perpetual monitoring of prisoners from a vantage point in a high tower helps to discipline the perpetrators. Chanu too kept a vigilant eye on his wife and children trying to impose his infallible authority on them.

Another trait native to a South Asian Bangladeshi is the infallible faith on religious scriptures and canons. Nazneen to overcome her pensive isolation engrossed herself into reading of the holy Quran: “She selected a page at random and began to read” (Ali). Reading the book soothed her soul with mysticism as if an antidote to her ominous captivity. With deep rooted belief in his culture, Chanu maliciously berates Nazneen. Even within the private sphere she is not allowed to perpetuate her holistic authority. When they used to go to shopping Chanu would push the pram and she would follow his footsteps, at the shops it was Chanu who would negotiate and barter with the shopkeeper. Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. (St. Paul). Chanu’s attitude towards Nazneen is misogynistic, he didn’t even consider it important for Nazneen to take up English lessons for better communication, because he regarded her inept to interact with the Londoners.

Said in his magnum opus *Orientalism* draws on Foucaultian idea that power relationships in the society operate through epistemological systems. The Occident perceived themselves as the

supreme bearers of knowledge with the potential to administer, while rendered the Orientals incompetent in need of enlightenment. Chanu’s dreams faced unwelcomed consequences in London due to the social exclusion, and deeply entrenched racial barrier. He had desperately wished to enter the affluent social circles of London only to meet failure. Frantz Fanon in *Wretched of the Earth* summarizes the proclivity of the Whites to compartmentalize the society into two halves inhabited by the superiors and the inferiors. The Orientals were affiliated with cannibalism, intellectual deficiency and crudeness. The hegemonic discourse of the Whites stigmatizing the Colored result in adverse outcome on the psyche of the Coloured. The deferred dreams of Chanu make him succumb to bouts of Double Consciousness. At once he voices his contempt against the Whites by mocking their culture “What is their culture? Television, pub, throwing darts, kicking a ball” (Ali). Chanu resents the despicable dynamics of business proliferated in London, where the shops made exhibitionism of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses, not because their shopkeepers were Hindu, but because they would be branded as authentic and therefore forfeit more money.

The Double Consciousness (Du Bois) garnered within him makes him question his self identity. His colonized psyche

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becomes an arena, where different cultures collide vying to seize the nexus of power. As Frantz Fanon has observed in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the colonised try to imitate the colonizers in an urge to trespass their socially elevated circle. Although highly conscious of his roots, Chanu falls into a precarious position, he is not altogether able to ascribe to the stringent moral codes of his culture, nor is he able to totally discard them. He tries to impersonate the colonizers, it is explicable through his sly remark on the African bus driver “Look how fit he is”; “So big, so strong. You see they were bred for it. Slavery” (Ali). Again when Chanu’s academic achievements fail to adorn him with success, and he joins as a taxi driver at Kempton Kors, he brands his colleagues as ‘ignorant types’. When offered, he even decides to drink beer with flamboyant Mrs Azad, and defends his act as an assimilations effort. Dr Azad’s wife too tries to feign the Westernized culture; she refrains from adorning herself with traditional Bangladeshi attire, flaunts her body in a Mini skirt, takes pleasure in drinking and shamelessly engages in flirtations. Boastful of her husband’s elevated position in London as a General Physician, she hurls snares at Chanu : “ Oh yes my husband is a very refined man. He puts his nose inside a book because the smell of real life offends him. But he has come a long way. Haven’t you, my sweet?”(Ali).

The apprehension of uprootedness and dissolution in the foreign culture, makes Chanu suffer from going – home syndrome, as exemplified by Mr Azad. According to consensus going-home syndrome is a common feature of the South Asian expatriates constricted in a foreign land. He articulates his wish to return before his daughters grow up to become individuals, and constantly contrives strategies to escape. Morally defeated and unable to engage himself actively into the mainstream culture, he abhorred the individualistic idealism of the British culture and wanted to adhere to the traditional conservatism of South Asian culture. Burdened and somber under the feeling of cultural invalidation, negative stereotyping the immigrants try to retain their sanity by keeping their minds engrossed into their indigenous cultural specific knowledge. Dr Azad expresses his yearning to return to his homeland Bangladesh in one of his conversation with Chanu: Every year I thought, ‘May be this year’; ‘But something would always happen’ (Ali).

Chanu’s vehement opposition of the British culture is evident when he tries to teach his daughters about the diversity of Bangladesh, he persistently tries to acquaint them with the renowned literary figures and music of Bangladesh. He conversed with them in Bengali and demanded their active

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engagement in his venture. Chanu demands his daughters to dress modestly like typical Islamic Bangladeshi women, and voices his outrageous contempt to the display of female body in short skirts, something that he considered a moral deficiency. Chanu had made an impassioned speech, after encountering the conversation between Mrs Azad and her daughter on the issue of soliciting money for going to the pub: “I am talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one’s identity and heritage. I am talking about children who don’t know what their identity is”. The potential of the possibility of the inception of intergenerational conflict arises, due to the unmatched cultural context between the first generation immigrants and the second generation immigrants. In the South Asian family there is a strong emphasis on collectivism and filial interdependence throughout one’s life. South Asian parents like Chanu considered individualism as an undesirable trait. However his daughters flaunt flagrant disrespect of the Bangladeshi culture. An effort to inculcate and regulate his children’s behaviour leads to an unbridgeable gap between the father and daughter: “Shahana didn’t want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans, she hated kameez... When Bangladesh was mentioned she pulled a face. She didn’t know and wouldn’t learn that Tagore was the true father of her nation”(Ali). Shahana’s rebellious remark

bears testimony of her sheer neglect of Bengali culture “ I didn’t ask to be born here” (Ali). Her aversion towards Bangladesh is also highlighted when she ridicules Bangladesh as a flood-ridden country.

Nazneen who had initially borne strong prejudice against the culture of London, undergoes a sudden transformation from a meek subservient woman to a woman of agency. It is within the liberationist aura of London that she undergoes an epiphany realization and decides to shun her fatalistic passivity. Nazneen’s first engagement with the real life in London, is when she gets lost and meanders through the vast populated streets amidst the hullabaloo: “Nazneen began to be aware of herself: without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination” (Ali). Through her new found agency, she intrudes into the public sphere, preoccupies herself with the profession of a seamstress, and enters into an adulterous affair with Karim a middle man who dictates the terms of her work.

Nazneen abandons the long cherished convictions and gathers courage to retort back to Chanu’s decision to leave London, she replies “I can’t go with you”(Ali). Through her alliance with the Westernized space she enters into the phase of new found liberation, she cannot afford to return to Bangladesh. Nazneen’s

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assimilations hopes are not the only reason for her decision not to return to her homeland, it is also under the fear of an insecure future in the deplorable circumstances in Bangladesh that she wants to stay back in London. Opposed to the sheltered life of Nazneen in London, Hasinaher sister who lives at the site of cultural purity has to face abasement and stumble to her fate. The horrifying morbid condition of Bangladesh is unfolded through her letters to Nazneen in Pidgin English. In contrast to the lofty ideal that one bears for one's nation, her letters highlight the pathos of the economically backward yet culturally constructed space of Bangladesh.

Nazneen chooses to merge and blend in the utopian individualistic idealism of London. She rejects a neat resolution and uncompromisingly leaves Chanu for the better, and joins Razia in her business venture. The ending of the novel leaves us with a bleak note of possibility of cultural miscegenation. A sense of cultural integration is exemplified through the final image of sari-clad Nazneen donning ice-skates, something she has always been fascinated to do. Nazneen puts forward an overwhelming question, reconsidering their ability to skate wearing a saree. Razia's answer sums up and is suggestive of a new

kind of feminism, when she replies "This is England. You can do whatever you like"(Ali). Her statement bears instance of the possibility of the intertwining of hierarchies of culture across time and space, a movement from otherness to the centripetal society.

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