



# Voices Of Women In Monika Ali's Brick Lane

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## ABSTRACT:

Monika Ali's *Brick Lane* is a potent mix of bleak fortitude, conflicting cultures and wonderful lyrical passages. This successful novel was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize. It depicts the miserable condition of Bangladeshi woman in England. The feminist writer urges equal right for women in male dominant society. Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir are trying to give a new kind of awakening and consciousness among women in the present era. The present paper explores the transformation of Nazneen and the feminist voices in the novel. The novel shows great transformation in the character from a compliant, dependent wife into a self-reliant, empowered individual. The study discusses the complex interplay between culture, gender, and identity and emphasizes the nature of empowerment in diverse cultural country. It has also focuses on challenges faced by women in patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Feminism, empowerment, culture, identity, patriarchal.

This paper presents the struggle of a Bengali immigrant woman in London. *Brick Lane* is significant literary work highlighting the intersection of gender, culture and migration providing a thoughtful portrayal of immigrant life. This novel delves into the lives of Bangladeshi immigrants and sheds light on the struggles faced by women through feminist lens. The beauty of Nazneen portrays lies in this how she maintains and develops her on foreign land. Her journey as she moves from a rural area of Bangladesh to London after an arrange marriage with Chanu, a man who is older than her. She agrees to marry Chanu in the hope of a better future. On contrary all her hopes shattered down. "Clearly female and male roles are neither equal nor fixed. They differ from place and this spatial variation is most marked in the Third World". (Momsen, 1996) She very truthfully shows male dominated society. It shows through the behaviour of Chanu. He always wants to prove that he was superior and well educated than Nazneen.

Chanu thinks that he did a great job to marry a village girl. Chanu does not allow her to do job because his attitude shows patriarchal set up of society where women were confined to the four walls of house. "If the wife is working it is only because the husband cannot feed them. Lucky for you I am an educated man (*Brick Lane*184)". Razia was inspirational woman wants to seek her own ways in life. She is revolutionary by nature and wants to be independent so that she can live a life of self-respect and confidence. "Only thing I care about is they don't have to do this same thing as me. New chairs, new sofa, and no more second-hand toothbrush for my kids this is what I am working for (*Brick lane*189)".

Nazneen always want to rise in life but unfortunately she does not get opportunity because girls have not equal importance in society. Nazneen represent the traditional side of woman and Razia represents the modern side of woman like two sides off coin. Nazneen has influence of Hasina (her sister), Shahana (her daughter), Razia (her good friend) to develop her lifestyle. Shahana does not want to live under control of anybody and live freely life in any situation. She never accepts the authority of others and interruption of any person in her life. She left her parent house then the house of her husband because he beats her. She is not a blind follower of fate like her sister as she believes on her is not own fate. Nazneen inspired by her views. "Whenever she got a letter from Hasina, for the next couple of days she imagined herself an independent woman too". (Brick Lane 93) Nazneen is the best representation of the status and domestic condition of Muslim women in the society. Some women are away from sense of freedom and freedom means nothing for them. They learn only to support their husbands in their right or wrong deeds. Women's status is secondary and subordinate in society. They cannot play leading role in male dominated society that's why their hidden talent remains uncover.

"The fact is that substantial numbers of young Muslims women are virtually enslaved in Britain; they grow up in what can only be called a totalitarian environment. I know this from what my patients have told me. They are not allowed out of the house except under escort, and sometimes not even then; they are not allowed mail or use of telephone; they are not allowed to contradict a male member of the household, and automatically subject to his wishes; it is quite legitimate to beat them if they disobey in the slightest. Their brothers are often quite willing to attack anyone who speaks to the women in any informal context. They are forced to wear modes of dress that they do not wish to wear. Their schooling is quite often deliberately interrupted, so that they are not infected by western ideas of personal liberty; ambitious for a career, they are kept at home as prisoners and domestic slaves". (Dalrymple 2005)

Nazneen is living in new country and environment but she lives in old way as a Muslim domestic house wife. Her husband, Chanu always tries to dominate her and insult her to show his power. She adjusts her life and gains so much confidence. She supports Chanu in the hour of dire economic trouble. She starts the work of sewing. Razia, her friend helps her in every work and said. "Ask him this, then. Is it better than our own country, or is it worse? If it is worse, then why is he here? If it is better, why does he complain?". (Brick Lane 72)

Razia's attitude raises a new spirit in Nazneen and she enjoys the actual colour of life. She begins to break the shackles of mental slavery. Chanu wants to keep under control Nazneen but she made her image of traditional and modern woman. As peter Barry very beautifully explains in his book 'Beginning Theory' an introduction to literary and cultural theory "Feminist pointed out, for example, that in the nineteenth century fiction very few women work for a living, unless they were driven to it by dire necessity. Instead, the focus of interest is on the heroine's choice of marriage partner, which will decide her ultimate social position and exclusively determine her happiness and fulfilment in life, or her lack of these (Brick Lane, 117)". Bahri also claims that "there are no women in the third world". (Bahri, 2004)

After marriage Nazneen went to London with Chanu. They live in Brick Lane, the name of a street, where the Bangladesh community lives. That's why this place known as Banglatown. She gave birth to two daughters but she never enjoys her sexual life in natural way. Her sexual life is completely mechanical. Chanu's age is twice than her. "A man can live without sex. He can live without it, but he cannot bear the thought of no sex. This is my suggestion (Brick Lane 65)". In male dominated society in sexual relationship women are always considered as a commodity. Then she attract towards Karim who gives her clothes for sewing. In the very opening chapter we can see very clearly difference between man and woman. Nazneen's father Hamid when comes to know the birth of a baby girl he shows no happiness even he was not worried about her well being. Banesa declared her dead because there was no moment in her body instead of worry about her Hamid sees her only one or two times. It shows careless and negative attitude towards girls in society. 'A girl,' said Rupan. 'I know. Never mind,' said Hamid. 'What can you do?' and he went away

again (Brick Lane14)". Her mother is a highly superstitious lady who believes in black magic and fate completely "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' (Brick Lane14)". After the climax of the novel Nazneen has been totally change. She becomes independent and Chanu depends on her. "Most women lives remained centred on their traditional roles, and they had limited access to markets, productive services, education, health care, and local government". (Heitzman & Worden, 1989)

Nazneen shows the condition of an immigrant Indian girl on foreign land. "The hijab (often as "veil") is the form of scarf or hair covering commonly worn by Muslim women". (Godlas, 2002) She loves to see ice skating on television. When she see that men and women were doing ice-skating equally she feels so good. When women were going to fall men control them she likes all these things so much there was no kind of adventure spirit arises in her. She becomes to realize now that there is somewhere equal status of man and woman in society. Another reason of change in her nature is the incident of her mother's death who always teaches her to believe in fate she herself decides her fate and committed suicide. When her son falls ill she has full faith in God and leaves everything on God and also did whatever she can did but her son has died then she lost her faith in fate. It is a touch which gives her so comfort and pleasure. All these experiences teach her a lot and she has completely changed in the middle part of the novel. There are many reasons of this great change in her personality. Karim, a kind hearted man gives her cloth for sewing which makes her independent woman. He meets regularly with her; which makes their cordial relationship. They fell in love with each other. Nazneen feels that her life becomes colourful suddenly. She seeks meaning for her existence also. She never feels so happy and excited her in life before. She did sex with him and first time in her life she seeks real pleasure of sex. "In the bedroom everything changed. Things became more real and they became less real. Like a Sufi in trance, a whirling dervish, she lost the thread of one existence and found another. 'S-slow down,' he moaned. But she could not". (Brick Lane 299)

She realizes her importance. All the affection and love feelings which she always tries to find in Chanu all these things and pacification she finds in Karim. She has done her work before marriage under her father instruction and after marriage under her husband without any complaint and personal interest. She involves herself with Karim in daily work. "When the thought crept into her mind that the power was inside her, that she was its creator, she dismissed it as conceited. How could such a weak woman unleash a force so strong? (Brick Lane 300)". She does her work with more confidence and more competence. She talks with her daughters in free manners and shares her experiences with her. Even her daughters surprised to see the drastic changes and intelligence of her mother. Karim understand her needs in life, feelings and emotions. He becomes like a blessing in her life. She becomes independent which gives her power. Skills, vocational, and tertiary education are indispensable for enabling women and girls to enter the workforce on equal terms with men and to access better conditions, better pay, and better prospects.

She did hard work and gain her self-confidence. "If she had been borne deficient and only now been gifted the missing sense (Brick Lane 301)". She becomes aware, dared and conscious about her rights. Her personality has shown the differences between Nazneen and Chanu. Chanu comes under debt because of his extra expenses and thrown his entire financial burden on Nazneen. The role of Nazneen and Chanu becomes change due to reverse order of Chanu's life. This transformation has shown that strong and intelligent Chanu is actually weak and Nazneen became courageous, talented and strong lady by spirit who can face all the difficulties of life. In the last decades she depends on Chanu completely in order to fulfill her needs now she can earn and can help others also with money. "'I' will give you the money. I have some here. I was going to send it to Hasina (Brick Lane 315)". Nazneen has desire to help her sister in any ways but she could not do so because she herself depends on Chanu. Gradually with the passage of time; now she can do so what she wants and according to her own wish. She went market with Razia and shares some of her secrets. She told her about Mrs. Islam debt how her husband borrow money and purchases a computer and



sewing machine. Now she becomes able to pay the debt of Mrs. Islam but Razia warns her about the nature of Mrs. Islam how she caught men under her debt and increases it time to time.

Nazneen feels regret that she has wasted time in ignorance. “Some Muslim women experience double oppression from the culture of their community as well as the culture of their religion...our parents’ traditional attitudes...their cultural values, their family honour, their stubbornness to let go of the traditions. If a girl stands up for her rights, she brings shame on the family. These old fashioned ideas are what oppress Muslim girls”. (Jawad & Benn, 2003)

She does not want to waste her time. She sees very closely the value of an independent woman. She lives live life with more confidence and self-respect. Life means not only serving husband and children only. She starts living for herself now which she never did before in her life. “Nazneen laughed loudly. The assistant looked uncomfortable, as though laughter were something new and unsettling (Brick Lane 314)”. Karim makes Nazneen feels that as she falls in love first time. He realizes her importance in society. He invites her in a meeting which is held for Muslim community and for their welfare. First time in life she gets so much respect and regard. She got the right of voting here also. She realizes the importance of her decisions also. Afary points out: “In Bangladesh most women are excluded from the lives of the community, excluded from all decision making in their community (Afary, 2004)”. She realizes that her decision can change someone’s life. As Karim elected the community only with the difference of one vote because that person got 99 votes and Karim got 100 votes. This one vote is of Nazneen which proves to be a decisive vote. She goes ahead with self-decision without any male. It is her great achievement of life.

This novel symbolizes so much important ideas about the freedom of woman. In the later part of the novel Nazneen has to face two choices she can marry with Karim or she can went back with her husband Chanu to Bangladesh. Her choice matter so much what she has to choose for her? This important idea is that now only. She did she wants to live with herself not choose Chanu or Karim. She experiences every kind of life. At the end we get self-dependent, confident Nazneen who can live without any male support. “Here are your boots, Amma. Nazneen turned round. To get on the ice physically- It hardly seemed to matter. In her mind she was already there”. (Brick Lane 492)

Monica Ali gives space to multiple female voices – silent, rebellious, resilient, and evolving. Through Nazneen’s transformation, Hasina’s hardships, and Razia’s assertiveness, the novel highlights the complexities of women’s lives in both Bangladesh and the diaspora. Ultimately, Ali portrays women as agents of change, capable of redefining their identity and destiny.

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