



# Formation Of Identity In Diasporic Space: A Study Of Monica Ali's Brick Lane

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**Abstract:** The emergence of innovative scientific developments & technological advancements has brought about a revolution in the realms of industrialization, transportation, and transnational trade & commerce. Therefore, the change in the mode of transportation has a visible impact on the traditional concept of distinct socio-political and cultural identity which is drastically changing against the backdrop of globalization. In this pretext, human identity can no longer be understood as a predefined fixed concept, rather it could be imagined as quite dynamic and susceptible to changes. As a result of the surrounding atmosphere, the immigrants are often cautious and careful to preserve their 'own identity' which often gets intimidated due to the dominance of other cultures, ethnicity, nationalities, and therefore, their imagination often oscillates between home- and host- land and it ultimately opens up a new direction for the construction of a new form of culture and identity in the hostland. Being a writer of the postmodern era, Monica Ali's fictional world is dominated by this conflicting situation; and a sense of alienation is revealed in her writings. She tries to encapsulate the ups and downs of the immigrant experience from the third-world perspective. There is a constant conflict in the minds of her characters who try to merge the two cultures of homeland and hostland in order to have a new kind of identity. The present article will try to explore the factors that either act as catalysts or create obstacles in generating new forms of identity for the immigrants in the country of settlement. It will try to throw some light on the individuation process in order to make the reader realize the painful condition of the dislocated people since they are in a state of mental dilemma. Moreover, it will also depict how some of the dislocated people are trying to come out of the dilemma by striking a balance between the cultures of the countries of origin and settlement.

**Key Words:** Immigration, globalization, alienation, dislocation, individuation process, identity.

**Introduction:** The question of identity has become a predominant concern of postcolonial literature since it has lost its homogeneity or fixity due to the movement of people and ideas within & across national boundaries. The identity of an individual is intimately associated with the location and its socio-political surroundings, and one's identity gets disrupted and diluted when the person happens to change his location by crossing certain socio-cultural and/ or political boundaries. In the case of diasporic communities, the process of identity formation is dependent on various factors including socio-cultural settings, race, ethnicity, religious background, and policy-making of the country of settlement as well as its connection with the country of origin. Memory often does play a pivotal role in the individuation

process of an immigrant when s/he is dislocated & dispersed from the land of origin. Memory refers to the capacity of the human brain to store and to reconstruct information based on the principle of selection and arrangement. It acts as a medium through which a dislocated person or community connects with the culture, history, and values of the ancestral land. The diasporic writers of South Asian origin such as – Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee, Monica Ali – have made painstaking effort to deal with the condition of the immigrants from South Asia to the developed countries of Europe & America.

The present paper exclusively explores the construction of identity in the adopted land as portrayed by Monica Ali in her maiden novel *Brick Lane* (2003) which deals with the Bangladeshi immigrants in London. In this novel, Monica Ali tries to bring to the forefront the constant urge of the people who are in the pursuit of consolidating their ‘own’ identity in their adopted land. The immigrant has to face a moral dilemma regarding whether he should follow the values of ancestral culture or those of the hostland, and this conflicting situation has been indicated as “double hesitation” by Samir Dayal (54). However, the immigrants often try to maintain a balance between the culture of the homeland and that of the hostland, and the negotiation between the two cultures necessitates the emergence of syncretic identity. The interaction, overlapping, and intersection of the various cultures give rise to the potential power of resistance and transformation which is termed by Bhabha as the “third space of enunciation” (37).

**Discussion:** Through her writings Monica Ali shows that the issue of identity has gradually become a complicated concept due to its fluidity in the world of globalization. In this connection, we may recall Avtar Brah who claimed that identity has become an element of “multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries” (Brah 194). Although identity is constructed over a long period of time it is susceptible to changes. Being a writer of the postmodern era, Ali’s fictional world is dominated by inner conflict in the minds of her characters who try to merge the culture of the homeland and that of the hostland. The narrative of the novel opens with the birth of the main character Nazneen in the Mymensingh district of the then East Pakistan (i.e., present day Bangladesh). When she was eighteen years old, she was married off to Chanu, a Bangladeshi living in London, and hence, she had to move to London immediately after their marriage. This society was initially unknown to her in terms of culture, tradition, social system, and language. Being isolated and dislocated from her ‘own environment’ Nazneen tried to draw solace by harbouring a nostalgic memory of her childhood spent with her younger sister Hasina who has also been in displaced condition due to her independent spirit. In *Tower Hamlets* she felt the lack of natural surroundings of her country life of Bangladesh. However, she was able to strike up friendship with Mrs. Islam and Razia who enlightened her as well as enkindled a sense of urgency to be in touch with the culture of the new land as she admits before her, “...you have to give up your culture to accept” the culture of the adopted land (Ali 29).

Nazneen’s friendship with Razia is getting strengthened and deep-rooted day by day, and this friendship proves to be extremely fruitful in making her independent. From the very beginning, Razia has been sincere in instructing Nazneen about the various things in London and making her aware of the people around her. Razia always gives her advice regarding everyday affairs and remains faithful through weal and woe. Ultimately, it is through Razia Nazneen starts transforming into a mature person. Nazneen comes to learn that Razia is in pursuit of a job in a factory so that she can meet the demands of her children without caring about what her husband would say or what the community would think of her. Such an attitude of Razia towards life has greatly influenced Nazneen’s perspective.

Although Nazneen was unable to make an adjustment to the new environment in London, it becomes subsequently plausible for her to create her own space in the alien territory by striking a balance between the socio-cultural setting of London and the culture she inherits from her homeland. She is in favour of making herself familiar with the surroundings in order to give room to the culture of the adopted land. Nazneen is gradually seen to become an emancipated woman by shedding off her old 'self' of a submissive wife. The novelist has shown a shift of her mind by asserting, "The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white light and glory" (Ali 41). Therefore, she is eagerly willing to visit the nearby areas of Brick Lane to be fit in the diasporic space and is pleased to be able to communicate with a stranger in English as "she has been understood and acknowledged" (Ali 61).

On the other hand, Nazneen's husband Chanu fails to understand the new generation's enthusiasm to become assimilated with the dominant culture despite being a highly educated person and having been in London for many years. His elder daughter complains to her mother, "We are not allowed to speak English in this house" (Ali 193) as she Nazneen is tolerant to her daughters' preferences. However, his economic failure made him turn his back against the English people though he has been liberal to her daughters at the initial stages regarding their education and future prospects. He has been working in a company for a few years without getting due promotion. Having denied the promotion Chanu declares his resignation from the company. For him, the country of origin serves as an ideal land to offer him solace to satisfy his vanity. In this connection, we may agree with Alistair Cormack that Chanu is surrounded by "a fantasy built on pedagogic notions of Bangladesh and England" (quoted in Lahiri 129). Chanu constantly reminds his wife that he will not allow their daughters to be forgetful about the culture of Bengal since he will return to Bangladesh immediately after saving a lump sum amount. Therefore, he asks Nazneen to prepare the minds of Sahana and Bibi so that they might easily adjust to Bangladeshi culture. However, Nazneen becomes worried about the consequence of their return on their daughters since they have been brought up in a cultural environment which is quite different from that of Bangladesh. She is of the opinion that the younger daughter probably would come to terms with the new environment but it would be quite painful for Sahana who "would never forgive her" (Ali 183). Despite Chanu's conscious & sincere effort to make his daughters well aware of the Bengali culture and its heritage, they seem to have more attachment to the culture of their adopted country. Sahana expresses her reluctance 'to go back home' because she prefers jeans to Kameez (Ali 180). Both Sahana and Bibi are apprehensive of what will happen to them if they go back to Dhaka. In fact, for them, Bangladesh is synonymous with gender discrimination and poverty. They have formed a negative image of Bangladesh by listening to the stories and experiences of their mother. Therefore, Sahana teases her younger sister by saying, "You'll be married off in no time.... your husband will keep you locked up and make you weave carpets all day long" (Ali 395).

Nazneen stepped in London from a Bangladeshi Muslim family with the baggage of cultural and religious values. She tries to maintain a distance from the values of the western society and thinks that the people of that society are antagonistic towards the Bangladeshi immigrants. But, one day she is suddenly obsessed with the idea that her life will be drastically changed if she changes her clothes. Therefore, in the absence of her husband at home, she tries to experiment this by putting on her husband's trousers. Her inclination towards Western apparel shows that she is gradually preparing herself both mentally and emotionally to combine the tradition and the present environment to form a new type of identity what may be called 'hybrid identity'. Now she is in favour of being integrated within the fold of the dominant culture. She realizes that "...if she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well" (Ali 277).

Chanu has been in the close circle of Dr Azad, a Bangladeshi living, and practising medicines in London. They often get involved in thought-provoking discussions on several issues of contemporary socio-politics. While addressing the plights of the immigrants both of them agree that the immigrants cannot get rid of the haunting memory of the homeland, and their attachment to the country of origin is stronger than that of the land of settlement. They often take refuge in their memory to give healing touch to their hearts. However, such memory of homeland is not a collective whole, rather it is, in the words of Salman

Rushdie "...broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (11). The imagination of their country of origin appears to them 'flawless.' Therefore, they often think of going back to the source country, and this trend of the immigrant is termed by Dr Aziz as the 'going home syndrome' (Ali 32). However, Chanu holds the British colonial power responsible for the destruction of the handlooms of Bengal as he claims, "The Dhaka looms were sacrificed so that the mills of Manchester could be born" (Ali 317).

Having resigned from his first job, Chanu is struggling to find a new comfortable job without much success. He blames the racist mentality of some British people for his economic impoverishment. In this connection we may make mention of Avtar Brah who wrote, "I tried to mix with white people for a few years. But no matter how much you tried to mix with them, at the back of their minds they always have this thing... that you're not the same" (61). Chanu takes an oath of not harbouring any kind of love for the country of settlement just as the British colonial power had done in the Indian subcontinent. Having encountered with discriminatory racialist behaviour in the West, Chanu tries to reclaim his identity by asserting that it was the Muslim world that showed light to Europe when they had been in the realm of darkness for centuries. He claims, "We saved the work so that your so-called St. Thomas could claim it was for his own discovery. That is the standard of our scholarship and that is the standard of their gratitude" (Ali 215).

During his conversation with Mrs. Azad, Chanu talks about an immigrant's alienation, assimilation, and integration in the country of settlement. He thinks that an immigrant's life is replete with hardships, and remarks, "To be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy" (Ali 112). Mrs. Azad is explicitly critical of the parochial & biased view of the immigrants and holds the reluctance of the immigrants for their estrangement & alienation. She is of the opinion that the immigrants should be liberal enough to make an adjustment to the culture of the hostland without engaging in a blame game. She unequivocally clarifies her own position by claiming:

"Listen, when I'm in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. I work with white girls and I'm just one of them. If I want to come home and eat curry, that's my business.... The society is racist. The society is all wrong. Everything should change for them. They don't have to change anything" (Ali 114).

The conversation which took place between Chanu & Mrs. Azad made a lasting impression on the psyche of Nazneen who is now prepared to introspect her self-image and isolation as well as her position towards the cultures of the home- and hostland.

Dr. Azad & Chanu have long been intimate and their friendship is almost inseparable even though both of them belong to entirely two different worlds. Nazneen was curious to know the mystery behind the attachment and often thought that the doctor's regular visit was caused by his longing to alter the taste of food. However, she subsequently realizes that though Dr. Azad has money and fame he cannot share his thoughts with his family members since his wife and daughter have overtly adopted the values of Western world. On the other hand, Chanu can easily communicate his views, ideas, constraints, and sufferings with his family members but his desire to gain economic prosperity is still far from his reach. Whereas Dr. Azad fails to keep himself dominant in his family, Chanu fails in the field of economy. So, both of them are in an identity crisis in one sense or the other. Nazneen gives an account of this situation in the following words: "And so they entwined their lives to drink from the pools of each other's sadness. From their special watering holes, each man drew strength" (Ali 328). Hence, their dissatisfaction & frustration led them to have a mutual friendship. As a result, Chanu becomes unsuitable to be integrated within the mainstream society of London. Therefore, he is seen to come back permanently by living behind his family back in London.

Nazneen once thought of an alternate source of income instead of maintaining only household chores. She thinks of finding an alternative source of income whereby she will be able to extend financial support to her husband's plan of returning to Dhaka or she will, at least, send money to her sister without letting her husband know about it. In fact, being unable to earn sufficiently enough for the maintenance of family expenditure Chanu wants his wife to do some work at home for additional income. That is why he

presents her with a sewing machine as a birthday gift by borrowing money from Mrs. Islam. Unfortunately, this sewing machine has become a means of tearing up Nazneen's secure zone of religious tradition since it is the sewing machine that brings Nazneen in close contact with Karim, the middleman who supplies her sewing material from the textile factory of his uncle.

As has already been indicated, Nazneen always tries to maintain a balance between the two cultures, and has been quite aware of her tradition of abstaining from indulging in any sort of extra-marital affairs. However, being fascinated with Nazneen's active role in maintaining family affairs and her happy family life, unlike Karim's parents who had never developed a suitable relationship, that made Karim 'furious' (Ali 300). Besides, despite belonging to the second generation of immigrants and having been educated in the Western academia, Karim's worldview is shaped by the patriarchal mentality, and therefore, he is in pursuit of a submissive wife. His frequent visit to Nazneen ultimately leads her to develop an extramarital affair with him. In spite of being conscious of Karim's radical temperament, Nazneen seems to be carried away by his words. Subsequently, the relationship between Nazneen and Karim has reached a stage of illicit physical affair which is against her ethics & morality. Being tormented by a prick of conscience, she makes a futile attempt to get rid of the extramarital affair but she proves to be an impotent before the colossal personality of Karim. Monica Ali has given a pen picture of her situation in the following fashion:

If ever her life was out of her hands, it was now. She had submitted to her father and married her husband; she had submitted to her husband. And now she gave herself up to a power greater than these two, and she felt helpless before it. (Ali 300)

Karim, who belongs to the second generation of Bangladeshi immigrant family, has never visited the land of his ancestors and cannot even talk properly in Bengali. Nazneen feels sympathy for him. He was born and brought up in England, and so he has every right to defend his rights by challenging racism. Karim along with a few Muslim youths has founded a radical group named Bengal Tigers in response to Lion's Hearts, a group of white supremists. Naturally, the confrontation of the two groups and heated 'leafleting campaigns' (Ali 259) has created an atmosphere of tension and insecurity among the residents. The Bengal Tigers appointed an "imported imam with the women's shoes" (Ali 302) a spiritual leader for the members to radicalize the people. The word 'imported' hints at the incompatible situation created by the imam. Therefore, the imam's introduction of the new cultural setup is also 'imported' which is alien to the cultural atmosphere of London. This is why conflict grows between the two extremist groups when there emerges conflict of interests regarding the matter of dominance.

As mentioned earlier, Chanu's inability to establish himself economically makes him indifferent to the land of settlement and so, he has inclined to the land of origin. Bangladesh has become, to borrow from Avtar Brah, a 'mythic place of desire' (188) to Chanu by overlooking its prevailing socio-political injustice. Naturally, he is filled with ethereal joy when he finds a report published in a newspaper, "Bangladesh ranks Number One in the World Happiest Survey" (Ali 350). However, Nazneen does not express any sign of excitement since she knows the ground reality of Bangladesh through the letters from her sister Hasina. Since Nazneen has become mature enough with the passage of time, she turns down such a baseless report by saying, "I don't believe this survey" (Ali 351). Chanu's utopian notion about his country of origin is the brainchild of his romantic vision which has hardly any relationship with the real scene and condition of Bangladesh. Chanu's desire to return to Bangladesh is intensified due to the growing sense of insecurity among the Muslims following the attack on the Twin Tower at Pentagon. The situation turns so grave that the parents ask their daughters to leave behind head scarves at home (Ali 376). Such volatile ambience compels him to take his ultimate decision to return to Bangladesh without giving it a second thought.

Although the situation of an immigrant woman, in the words of James Clifford, is 'doubly painful' due to the constant struggle between the tradition of patriarchy and the "demand of family and work" in the country of settlement, she "refuses the option of return" (314) since she enjoys comparatively more freedom in this diasporic space. Therefore, Nazneen broods over the decision seriously and falls into a dilemma regarding whether she should accompany her husband or should stay back with her daughters

in London. In both cases, she must face difficulties. If she wants to stay back in London, she will have to marry Karim but it would be difficult for her daughters to adjust to 'a new father'. But if she goes back to Dhaka, her daughters 'would be miserable' (Ali 405) regarding the adjustment to the culture of Bangladesh. On the eleventh hour of their return to Bangladesh, Sahana runs away from home to escape going back. Chanu makes a futile attempt to convince his wife and tries to grasp her concerns. Therefore, instead of forcing Nazneen and his daughters to return to Bangladesh he decides to go alone for the time being by changing his plan. Before his departure, he tells his daughters, "I have suggested and your mother has agreed, that three of you come later" (Ali 479). On his return to Dhaka Chanu keeps regular contact with them, and advises his daughters: "Be good girls, do as your mother tells you, finish your homework every night, don't waste time ...." (Ali 479).

Chanu's decision to leave behind London to have a permanent settlement in Bangladesh pleases Karim greatly, and he tries to persuade Nazneen to begin a new life after getting married. However, Nazneen tells him in a straightforward manner that she does not want to marry him under any circumstances though she is not going back to Bangladesh along with her husband. This reveals the determination of Nazneen's heart and it is quite evident that she has become an emancipated woman having a comprehensible understanding of her surrounding atmosphere as well as the people around her. She knows Karim "was born a foreigner" (Ali 448) and he has no direct relation with the culture of Bengal, and it might give birth to inconveniences in their marital life. Being conscious of the future, she decisively renounces Karim's proposal by asserting "We cannot get married" (Ali 451). This indicates the height of Nazneen's maturity level as in the course of time she has been able to claim her agency as an independent personality who can navigate between home and the world in a balanced way.

**Conclusion:** In fact, Nazneen has been portrayed as a seasoned woman who has full control over her emotions and imagination. She is now a responsible mother and acts as a confident woman who has the courage to confront any sort of unfavourable situation. She exemplifies South Asian immigrant women who have been able to taste freedom by extricating themselves from all sorts of pressures. In this connection we may agree with Himadri Lahiri who has pointed out, "Brick Lane narrativizes stories of South Asian immigrant women's arrival, struggle, and achievement of success" (149). She is now capable of shooing away baseless and distressful thought & imagination. Therefore, she is no longer carried away by merely looking out of the window as it used to be the case at the earlier stage of her arrival to London. In fine, it can be conferred that Nazneen has become a fully grown character who has been successful in maintaining a balance between duty and responsibility; between emotion and reason; and between tradition and current reality. Nazneen's level of maturity can be surmised when she reminds Karim against harbouring any hope of marrying her by asserting, "It would be too difficult for us to be together. So, I think we had better stop now" (Ali 452). Nazneen is now capable of bridging the gap between her expectations and reality, present with past, hence she stays back in London where "She sang along, filling her lungs from the bottom, letting it all go loose, ...." (Ali 489).

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