

تهميش المهاجرين في رواية "شارع بريك لاين" لمونيكا علي

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الملخص

يناقش هذا البحث التهميش والتبعية في رواية "شارع بريك لاين" للكاتبة مونيكا علي. تصور هذه الرواية التهميش الذي يتعرض له المهاجرون الذين ينتمون إلى طبقة التوابع وخاصة النساء منهم بسبب الثقافة الذكورية أولاً وثانياً بسبب الخطاب العنصري في التعامل مع المهاجرين المختلفين ثقافياً في بريطانيا. كذلك يبين هذا البحث كيف يستمر تهميش هذه الطبقات من خلال تصوير الرواية للإسلام وذلك بتبني كاتبة العمل للخطاب الليبرالي لبريطانيا مما يؤدي إلى ضعف تمثيل هؤلاء المهاجرين وكتمان أصواتهم المختلفة.

الكلمات الدالة:

مونيكا علي، "شارع بريك لاين"، التهميش، التبعية، التابع، الاندماج، التعدد الثقافي، الإسلام.

Immigrants' Marginality in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

This research discusses marginality and subalternity in Monica Ali's novel entitled *Brick Lane*. The novel presents the marginalization which subaltern immigrants, especially women, are subjected to in Britain due to the patriarchal culture. Also, these immigrants are marginalized due to the racist discourse in Britain when dealing with immigrants. This research shows how this marginality continues through the novel's representations of Islam which silence the Muslim voice in favor of adopting the multicultural liberal discourse of Britain.

Key Words:

Brick Lane, Monica Ali, Marginality, Subalternity, subaltern, Assimilation, Multiculturalism, Islam.

This research explores the representations of marginality and subalternity in Monica Ali's novel, *Brick Lane* (2003). This novel presents the lives of Bangladeshi immigrants who live in London's East End suburb of Tower Hamlets. The novel is focalized through Nazneen, a village girl from Bangladesh who marries a man twenty years her senior and comes to live with him in London. In her new life, Nazneen suffers the poverty and difficulties of immigrant life in Britain as well as the ups and downs of coping, resisting and integrating in a socially, racially, culturally and politically stratified time of Britain's history. The marginality which the novel deals with is part of these immigrant's lives and a position which they continue to inhabit in the host country. It is argued in this research that the novel's representation of subalternity manifests through presenting Bangladeshi subaltern immigrants as caught between double displacement, the discourse of patriarchy and the racist discourse of Britain. Furthermore, the novel represents and casts Islam and the Muslim voice as marginal and subaltern in Britain which reiterates and reinforces racial and cultural stereotypes concerning Muslims.

Representing South Asian immigrants and especially female immigrants as caught between double displacement, the continuous patriarchal discourse of Bangladeshi community and the racist discourse of Britain proves the continuation of their subaltern position within the host country. These representations prove Spivak's point that the female subaltern is more exploited and oppressed despite the difference of

geography ("Can the Subaltern Speak", 84). The novel sets through its representation of Tower Hamlets the poor, densely populated neighborhood of Bangladeshi immigrants, the authority and pervasiveness of the patriarchal discourse on both male and female immigrants. The patriarchal discourse compels an unquestioning adherence to it through badging and pointing to any opposing or different behavior as unacceptable.

The community set in the novel by Monica Ali is a patriarchal community dominated by men, however, men are also subject to the limiting positions of this patriarchal discourse. As Lois Tyson points "patriarchal gender roles are destructive for men as well as for women" (*Critical Theory Today*, 87). This discourse requires from immigrant men an image and aura of success within the host country in order to set both in front of their small families in Britain and their families in Bangladesh. This keeps men under constant pressure to be successful. The men in the novel are controlled by this discourse like Nazneen's husband Chanu, and her lover Karim. Chanu is affected by the patriarchal discourse in his constant attempts to prove his success and difference from the other Sylheti of the council estate whom he calls ignorant peasants as he states: "Brothers! These peasants claim to be my brothers. They cannot compose even one proper sentence" (*Brick Lane*, 274). Chanu sees himself as a refined educated man with a degree in English literature from Dhaka University: "I have a degree in English Literature from Dhaka University. I have studied at a British university – philosophy, sociology,

history, economics" (Brick Lane, 112). The drive to prove his difference from other members of his immigrant community makes Chanu eager to build the success which blinds him to the realities of the British society and its racist and discriminatory attitude towards immigrants. The difference he tries to prove is not materialized in his behavior as he follows the same lifestyles and attitudes of other members of the community whom he criticizes. His inability to set himself aside from the traditional culture which dominates the Bangladeshi community proves how pervasive this patriarchal discourse on the immigrant. When Chanu is making his point to Nazneen why she should not go on her own if she wanted to go shopping: " 'Why should you go out?' said Chanu. 'If you go out, ten people will say, "I saw her walking on the street." And I will look like a fool" (Brick Lane, 45). Chanu is not concerned about his wife, he is only concerned about his image in front of the community.

Limiting female space is part and parcel of the Bangladeshi patriarchal discourse. The society limits women's encounter with outer society and relegates them to the domestic space. This is done by using the patriarchal discourse which defines and sets gender roles. It is through this limiting of the female space that men subordinate women and control their inclusion within the host society. This is also done by using the religious discourse which naturalizes keeping women under men's dominance and control. Relegating women to the domestic space also entails incurring in the women a normalization of

this enclosure within the domestic realm as women only fit for cooking and raising children according to the patriarchal discourse. Tyson states that in patriarchal culture:

The belief that men are superior to women has been used, feminists have observed, to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power, in other words, to keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political, and social power. (86)

Indeed, the different Bangladeshi men in the novel seem to abide by this discourse except Dr. Azad who does not follow the traditions of the Bangladeshi community. The novel shows that most of Nazneen's time and other women's time is consumed in doing housework and wifely chores. Nazneen is made to accept this as her duty in life and the only role associated with being a woman. Firstly, she is made to accept this patriarchal gender role through her upbringing and the teachings of her mother. Secondly, through her marriage to Chanu where she becomes compelled to obey her husband in everything. Nazneen's readiness to accept her position and her role is further encouraged by Chanu's constant reminders to her of her position, her duty and her simple village background. Chanu also reminds Nazneen at every possible chance how lucky she is when he says: "I don't stop you from doing

anything. I am westernized now. It is lucky for you that you married an educated man. That was a stroke of luck'" (*Brick Lane*, 45). Nevertheless, Chanu acts as the other Bangladeshis of the council estate whom he constantly criticizes.

Another manifestation of the patriarchal discourse which dominates men's behavior is devaluing women which is evident in men's attitudes within the novel. Lois Tyson states that "in every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is other: she is objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have" (92). Chanu's behavior and how he deals with his wife is an example of this tendency. Although generally Chanu is not a violent or sharp-tongued man, but his devaluation of Nazneen's position and importance in the family as well as his devaluation of her mind in contrast to his high self-esteem and self-regard are evident throughout the novel. This high self-regard which Chanu shows is nurtured by the patriarchal culture. The patriarchal culture usually positions men in the higher and more privileged position of a binary opposition where women are the other degraded part. However, the novel presents Nazneen as more efficient as a parent and more successful in deciding and thinking for the best of the family than her husband. Nazneen's competence seems a threat to the masculinity of Chanu and how the patriarchal culture propels the man to view and value himself while tending to devalue the woman.

As in Bangladesh, the patriarchal discourse and the status of male's dominance within the household are also perpetuated by the religious discourse. The Purdah which Naila Kabeer, the Bangladeshi-British sociologist refers to in her influential study *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka* is defined as the traditional Islamic attitude of separating male and female spaces. Purdah according to Kabeer is:

A complex institution that entails much more than restrictions on women's physical mobility and dress. It denies women access to many opportunities and aspects of everyday life and at the same time confers upon them social status as a protected group.

(Cain et al. *Qtd.* in Kabeer, 41)

This study is cited by Monica Ali as being her influence for writing this novel. The Purdah entails in the context of Bangladeshi immigrants containing immigrant women to the domestic space. The male within the patriarchal discourse controls all aspects of women's life including their livelihood. The ability to be economically self-sufficient and independent is barred from women in order to keep them contained within the spaces assigned to them. This is done also to limit women's opportunities and limit their competition to men. When Nazneen starts working in sweatshop business, she hides the money she makes from her husband in order

to send it to her sister Hasina in Bangladesh. Hasina is caught in a similar circle of dominance and exploitation by a patriarchal culture and by a religious discourse. The two discourses require female engagement and participation, but at the same time bars women's freedom and financial independence. Nazneen's attempt to send money to her sister is her attempt to help her achieve a kind of economic independence that can allow her to break the cycle of exploitation by men.

The other prevailing and pervasive discourse which affects immigrants in Britain is the racist, discriminatory discourse especially towards immigrants from South Asia. As Tahir Abbas points " while racism on the basis of markers of race obviously continues, a shift is apparent in which some of the more traditional and obvious markers have been displaced by newer and more prevalent ones of a cultural, socio-religious nature"(49).

The novel depicts how the discrimination against immigrants turns from racial discrimination to religious and cultural discrimination. This is evident in the speech of one of the members of the Bengal Tigers, a group of young activists from the nationhood: "Thing is, see, they are getting more sophisticated. They don't say race, they say culture, religion."(*Brick Lane*, 241). This discrimination based on culture and religion becomes clearer in the period between (1980-2003) and especially after 9/11 attacks in which the novel happens. So, the immigrants in the novel face another discrimination due to being a Muslim minority in Britain.

The novel sets the Bangladeshi ghetto-like neighborhood of Muslim immigrants against the White British society. The community is of Bangladeshis and Sylhetis in particular who share the same geographical location in Bangladesh. The manifestations of the racist discourse in the novel are shown in the sharp contrast between Tower Hamlets and the industrial neighborhood next to it. This contrast is depicted in the novel through Nazneen's walk through the streets of Spitalfields in chapter six. Racism is also manifest most evidently in the white fanatics' group which call itself the Lion Hearts. The hate leaflets and the threats which this group causes to the inhabitants of the Tower Hamlets cover a wide range of the novel's events, especially before and after the 9/11 attacks.

Lion Hearts group targets Muslim immigrants based on a view that Muslims will change the face of Britain and impose their Muslim Sharia and religious doctrines on the British state. This is how this group views the cultural difference of Islam " The Islamification of our neighbourhood has gone too far. A Page 3 calendar and poster have been removed from the walls of our community hall. How long before the extremists are putting veils on our women and insulting our daughters for wearing short skirts?" (Brick Lane, 257). The racist discourse which demonstrates how immigrants are perceived by the British public is implemented within the view of the nation. The idea of Britain as a nation threatened by the existence of immigrants can be traced to the Thatcherite era. The first ten to twelve years of the novel's events

happen during the Thatcherite era and its aftermath of the effects on British society and the way it deals with Muslim immigrants.

The racist discourse also affects immigrants in the workplace and in the jobs offered to them. The novel depicts the limited chances and opportunities offered to South Asian immigrants for work and progress. Chanu struggles as well as Razia's husband to prove themselves and make their lives better but their efforts are thwarted by the racist society they live in which judges them according to their race and religion. Chanu comes to Britain with high hopes having a Bachelor's degree in English literature and aiming to work as a civil servant yet this dream is not materialized due to the circumstances of being a Bangladeshi immigrant in Britain. The social standing of these immigrants when they come to Britain as poor and low class stays the same and they do not seem to thrive in Britain or change their social standing or achieve a kind of social mobility. The novel dedicates a considerable portion of Nazneen and Chanu's life in discussing the promotion he seeks to receive. The competition on the promotion for Chanu seems unlikely as he deserves it according to the years he worked and what he accomplished however, his boss has a different view and the promotion goes to Chanu's English college. Chanu's downfall begins after he quits his job because of losing the promotion or more accurately after being sacked from his job. Chanu is cast within a harsh world with limited jobs offered to people like him, he then accepts to work as a taxi driver.

The racism the whole neighborhood is subject to is due to the growing sentiments of hatred towards Muslims in Europe. The

racism and the spread of Islamophobia are used by the Western media to portray an image of Muslims as terrorists and fundamentalists who want to change and destroy the democracy of the West. As Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin argue in their book *Framing Muslims*:

The images that emerge, and are repeated and circulated through modern channels of communication, are often little more than caricatures in which the propensity for extremism and violence of a small segment of politicized Islam is magnified and projected onto Muslim communities. (18)

The narrative points to how the political affiliations of young British Bangladeshis change from feelings of loss and nonbelonging in Britain to an identification with the causes and struggles of fellow Muslims outside Britain. This phenomenon which is found in different Muslim immigrant communities in Europe is a result of a racist and discriminatory discourse which these immigrants face that compels them to identify with people who share the same religion although they live in different nations. Also, due to globalization which facilitates the spread of the idea of a Muslim unity and a unified global Muslim identity. This idea of Muslims of Europe and the world as a Muslim Ummah is presented in the group which Karim and the other young activists in the neighborhood form and name the Bengal Tigers.

The group's leaders other than Karim want to divert the attention of the inhabitants of the council estate from their problems

to discuss the issues of Muslims in different parts of the world. Because of the effect of the events in the Muslim world which happen outside Britain on them, the lack of potential understanding and opportunities for the young Bangladeshi Muslims within Britain drive them more to identify with fundamentalist ideas of the Muslim religion and eventually Karim becomes politically engaged with fighters who fight in Afghanistan.

With the immigrants caught within the British society's racist discourse and the patriarchal discourse of the mother culture their voice and consciousness are silenced in the novel. Neither male nor female immigrants can truly exercise their free will and express their voice. The subaltern immigrant is denied the voice to express herself/himself as the racist and discriminatory culture of the host country bars such voice.

The second manifestation of marginality and subalternity in host countries is showing and representing Islam and the Islamic voice as subordinate and subaltern. The manifestation of this representation lies in how the novel presents the Bangladeshi Muslim community of Brick Lane. This representation silences the Muslim voice in favor of a British liberal reading of this community. The problem arises in how the novel's representation of the Bangladeshi Muslim community markets the image of Islam in Britain. Generally, Muslim immigrants with their faith and traditions are set aside mainstream Britain as incapable of assimilation and integration. This image in turn perpetuates the stereotypes which characterize Muslims in Britain. Therefore, Muslim immigrants are either

silenced or misrepresented and this also applies to this novel. So, although Nazneen and Razia are presented as smart and resourceful women, the narrative chooses to limit their experience in the outside world that immigrant women encounter in favor of another image. This image is the image of the dichotomy between the oppression faced by the patriarchal community and these women's attempts to achieve individuality and independence.

There were protests in the area of Tower Hamlets against the publication of the novel and its portrayal of Bangladeshi immigrants. These protests were small and received a much-focused media coverage that targets the issues of British Muslims in what the media makes as Islam's battle against the freedom of speech, and this is what argues Rehana Ahmed argues in her article "Brick Lane: A Materialist Reading of the Novel and Its Reception" (26). Also, the novel according to Nadia Valman is positioned in the tradition of Spitalfields novels because of its "dismissal of the broader and more demanding contexts of radical politics and religion in favour of the more limited theme of individual redemption" (3).

In addition, the novel depicts Islam as positioning its followers in a subaltern position. However, this subaltern position is caused by racism towards immigrants and their conditions in Britain. To discuss how the novel presents Islam as a subaltern religion, it is important to look to the representation of the Muslim community in London. The portrayal of this community is what caused the

protests and the objections from immigrants about their representation. Rehana Ahmed reads the protests which followed the publication of the novel as the manifestation of "a subordinate social position" (25). The protests no matter what position the critic chooses to take from them "should not negate the subordinate status of the community as a whole (including its relatively dominant voices) in the context of Britain" (29) continues Ahmed. *Brick Lane* represents the Bangladeshi community as a gossip-dominated community which disciplines its inhabitants by creating pressure through a society that watches and judges the deeds of every individual. Although men are also disciplined by this attitude, the novel focuses more on how Muslim women are disciplined out of fear of gossip and reputation and not because of genuine faith.

Furthermore, the novel shows this community as lacking active religious or civil leadership. The novel does not show any kind of political engagement or interest in the inhabitants of the area by any political entity. No interest in politics or political representations is shown in the novel even within the educated members of the community like Chanu and Dr. Azad. The area lacks governmental and political representation. This marginalization is evident in the novel and can be traced to the negligence targeted at this area for being a gathering of poor immigrants racially and religiously different from Britain's mainstream public image who can be targeted for their electoral voices. However, to understand this marginality and subalternity the novel should have included the problematics of the history of this area as Sukhdev Sandhu points.

The history of the area called Brick Lane is underscored and discussed in Sukhdev Sandhu's article "Come Hungry, Leave Edgy". In this article, Sandhu states how Brick Lane was seen as a temporary residence for all immigrants who came to the area before Bangladeshis. These people who migrated to Britain for success that will help them to ascend the social ladder and as a result they move out of this area keeping it for the poorest amongst them. Poverty and deprivation are symptomatic of this area. Sandhu points that at one time the area was called "The Black Hole of East London' to the Victorian press" However, when looking at previous migrations from Bangladesh to Britain of "sailors" and "lascars" we notice that they were not targeted for their race or defined by the British society as Muslims Sandhu adds. The growing hostility leads the immigrants to identify with their Muslim faith to counter the racialized definition of their existence by the British society. In the context of the novel Islam is constructed and depicted as the other of Europe. Therefore, Subaltern Muslims are constructed as the other. Furthermore, Monica Ali represents the Muslim community as a community which imports religious leaders from Bangladesh who are ignorant of the conditions of Bangladeshis in Britain. This community is also depicted as following dysfunctional leadership figures as happens in one of the meetings of Bengal Tigers:

The Secretary waved his pad. 'Wait. Wait. One more election. Spiritual Leader.' He jumped off the stage, dragged an old man from his seat and pushed him onto the

platform. Nazneen saw that the old man was wearing flat, open-toe sandals with a white plastic flower on the heel strap: women's shoes. And she knew that the imam had only recently been imported. He kept wetting his lips and smiling. He had not the slightest idea what was going on. He was duly elected. (*Brick Lane*, 242)

The representation of this area as following blindly attests to the novel's attitude to present Islam as positioning its followers in a subaltern position.

In addition, the novel depicts Islam as an antagonist culture to British culture and its secular and liberal values. Therefore, inclusion and integration in Britain encourage immigrants to embrace another mode of Muslim religion which is the secular mode that suits Britain. This is because Islam is shown in the novel as a religion which has a distinctive culture and therefore "the tensions over loyalty and belonging occur, since secular Western nationalism will not recognize religious national identity as a legitimate form" (Morey and Yaqin, *Framing Muslims*, 40). Monica Ali's representation of this community in the novel favors the British multicultural liberal mode which views the religious conservativeness of these immigrants as disagreeing with the British values and impeding to their inclusion. The novel encourages and depicts within its frame the secular mode of Muslim faith which suits the British society. This mode is best exemplified in the characters of Chanu, Dr. Azad, Mrs. Azad and Razia. Despite the isolation which the novel tries to keep the focus of the reader on the familial life of Nazneen, the society outside the

council estate shows how the dominant western discourse of British society penetrates within the immigrant community. This penetration leads people like Chanu, Razia and Dr. Azad to favor and adopt the liberal discourse of the West. This is also shown in the scattering of the Bengal Tigers group and Karim's disappearance as a fundamentalist Muslim from the narrative. So, the multicultural attitude suggests that Islam as a religion can be separated from the Bangladeshi culture, if progressive and secular understandings of the religion are encouraged and supported. However, this suggestion proves to be inapplicable in the novel because the conservative character which is Nazneen and the secular characters like Chanu, Dr. Azad and Razia are still viewed and judged as culturally and religiously Muslim. The secular Muslims are continuously othered even if they free themselves from the confines of the Muslim community. Therefore, the separation which the novel proposes cannot actually materialize in Britain. There is no one Muslim culture or one Islam that Bangladeshi immigrants adhere to. However, as Rehana Ahmed also suggests the novel mistakenly represents the Bangladeshi immigrants as one racial and religious group unified against mainstream Britain ("Brick Lane: A Materialist Reading of the Novel and Its Reception", 37).

So, Islam remains subaltern within the novel and not allowed to emerge because the novel represents it through the secular liberal discourse of the West. The liberal discourse does not attempt to actually include Islam within its image of British society. Many Muslim readers of the novel or viewers of the film may and will

find these totalizing representations unacceptable and unsettling. Monica Ali does not provide the other of these images to her readers. Her focus is on her reader which is presumably a British middleclass white male subject and this makes the novel and the subsequent film more unsettling to the Muslim community.

Also, the novel depicts the beginning of the formation of communal groups in Brick Lane which takes on religious nature due to the social, racial and religious tensions before and after the 9/11 events within Britain. The lack of political and social representation of this community and racism encourage such groups to take the lead. The Bengal Tigers group is formed by young Bangladeshis from the neighborhood. The group is formed to counter the Lion Hearts group. This group is read by Monica Ali in the novel as presenting an outlet for the Muslim youth of the council estate to express their Muslim identity and stress their difference from a British society which treats them with suspicion. However, by presenting the gatherings of this group which Karim invites Nazneen to through Nazneen's eyes with the interference of the narrator, Monica Ali makes the reader see the gradual change of this group to a fundamental Islamic group. When the youth of the neighborhood become more religiously committed, the novel points to the gap between their religious understanding, their actual circumstances and their interests as Muslims in Britain. Soon the disputes start arising between the members of the Bengal Tigers and some of the group leaders leave. Every attempt the Bengal Tigers do to resist the culture of mainstream Britain is read mistakenly as an

internal conflict by the dominant narrator who is focalized through Nazneen. Nazneen sees them as fighting among each other which further contributes to the image of Islam as a subaltern religion. This representation of a Muslim youth group turning to fundamentalism is not new in British fiction, but is rather a stereotype which the novel purports.

Monica Ali denounces the identification with Islam as a cultural identity in Britain but, at the same time does not give in the novel the space for the correct representation of the subalternity of Bangladeshi immigrants. By this Monica Ali, throughout her novel, further contributes to their marginalization and exclusion from the public sphere and media. This denouncing also contributes to forcing immigrants to identify with Muslim religion as a way to present and express their difference. The public sphere, and the media remain controlled and dominated by stereotypical images about Bangladeshi immigrants and people of the suburbs. The scene of the riot in the neighborhood is an evidence of the narrator's conflation with Monica Ali's views about the problematics of Muslim identity in Britain. Rehana Ahmed for example reads the riot scene as indicating and showing the marginalization of the whole neighborhood, "A brown-on-brown riot is in fact a territorial act caused by the lack of ownership of place or space" (34). However, when Nazneen witnesses some of the riot and its aftermath when she was searching for her daughter Shahana, she reads and interprets the riot as young Bangladeshi fighting among each other although the narration points to the darkness, disorder

and chaos which dominate the space of the riot. So, the novel as a reflection of Britain and the space it offers to immigrants shows that Britain does not provide the space for immigrants to identify with their faith freely. Britain and the novel set identification with conservative views of Islam as inciting nonconformity and proving a failure of integration. The novel seems to be representing the West's view of Muslims. This is what Nick Bentley points to in his book, *Contemporary British Fiction*: "the politics of *Brick Lane* make it palatable to a Western liberal tradition" (93).

In conclusion, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* represents the continuity of the subaltern and marginal position of South Asian immigrants in Britain. These immigrants are marginalized by the patriarchal discourse which manifests in religion and by the racist discourse of British society especially the women among them. Monica Ali's novel also marginalizes the Muslim voice by perpetuating the stereotypical image of Islam in Britain and by denouncing immigrant's identification with Islam as an identity in the face of the marginalization and racism they suffer from.

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