

**Physical Trauma As Presented In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane***

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Monica Ali was born in 1967 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, but grew up in England. Her English mother met her Bangladeshi father at a dance in northern England in the 1960s. Despite both of their families' protests, they later married and lived together with their two young children in Dhaka. This was then the provincial capital of East Pakistan which after a nine-month war of independence became the capital of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. On 25 March 1971 during this civil war, Monica Ali's father sent his family to safety in England. The war caused East Pakistan to secede from the union with West Pakistan, and was now named Bangladesh.

Through history, the situation of women dominated by men has often been looked upon as a parallel to that of colonised subjects controlled by dominant colonisers. Therefore, women worldwide have oppression and repression in common with colonised people, and colonised women can consequently be considered to be doubly oppressed. Postcolonial views of history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in postcolonial theory. And colonial oppression does not end with independence. Thus, the novel about the young Bangladeshi woman Nazneen moving to England may be viewed in both a postcolonial and a feminist perspective.

*Brick Lane* is a postcolonial work as the protagonist is a Bangladeshi who moves to England, and parts of the novel are descriptions from Bangladesh. In addition, many thoughts and memories deal with the country that some of the characters wish to go back to. The colonial history is portrayed through the characters, mainly Nazneen's Bangladeshi husband Chanu who has lived in Britain for many years. Chanu always speaks about the country where he was born, and draws comparisons between Bangladesh and Britain. To him, it is important to tell his daughters and wife that their country is the one that has benefited England and not the other way around. Eventually, it may seem like he himself is the one he is trying to convince.

Life, death and loneliness are introduced as themes in *Brick Lane* right from the start. In the beginning of *Brick Lane*, Nazneen is born. But she is not breathing, leaving everyone to think at first that she is dead. Early in the novel, Nazneen's father Hamid asks his daughter if she wants to see the picture of the man she is going to marry. The 18-year-old girl is soon sent off to England and London to a man much older than herself. A hawk foreshadows her future before she leaves; the bird flies against the sky, but shrinks into nothing, a symbol of what will happen to Nazneen. As a woman in a new country she will in many ways disappear like the bird. The concept of death is also described in relation to this episode as the villagers are in the process of burying their dead and looking for bodies after a tornado. In addition, a hut is portrayed as lying in the middle of a paddy. Due to the natural disaster, the hut '... looked wrong: embarrassed, sliding down at one side, trying to hide'. This is also a symbol of the new life the protagonist will have to deal with. Nazneen's future does not look very bright.

When the young bride arrives in London, her life is turned completely upside down. The new everyday life is not anything like her old one. From living an active life in the village of Gouripur, Nazneen is now spending her days in a flat in Brick Lane, London. She makes time pass by doing her household chores and looking out of the window. The only contact she has with people other than Chanu, her husband, is when she waves at the 'tattoo lady' living across from Nazneen. This lady becomes a symbol of loneliness and the life Nazneen is living. The woman is described as having a look of boredom, and is like the protagonist always alone when she appears at the window. Questions are raised about the woman in the novel: 'How can she just sit and sit? What is she waiting for? What is there to see?'. This also goes for Nazneen. What can she do with her life living in a strange culture? When the tattoo lady disappears from her window, Nazneen is told that she was sent to an institution, and is confronted with the question about why nobody acted when they saw her just sitting there. This woman is also an example of the sad side to British life as people are left alone without anyone bothering about them.

The British are not nosy about their neighbours, something that Nazneen actually enjoys because it gives her privacy. She finds the English ignorance positive as a contrast to the Bangladeshi gossiping. There are several other women experiencing even greater problems adapting to the new society than Nazneen. On one level, for Nazneen, they represent the variety of possibilities for immigrants concerning how to choose to live their new lives. Some assimilate quickly, while some do not manage to adapt at all. A woman has supposedly committed suicide by jumping out of her window. Nazneen pictures the woman smiling when jumping because by her act, she defied everyone. This may show Nazneen's thoughts about her new life; she understands why the woman had to do what she did. As a woman she may not have been able to make many decisions in her life, but now she has finally made an individual choice.

Life and death thus play an important part in the novel. On one of her first days in Britain, Nazneen cuts her finger when chopping onions: 'The drops slid together like mercury and rolled down the drain. How long would it take to empty her finger of blood, drop by drop? How long for the arm? And for the body, an entire body?'. In connection with this passage, Nazneen describes how lonely she feels. She misses people and has never been alone before. Back in the village there were always people everywhere. Her new life is quite the opposite. The thoughts of Nazneen when she starts bleeding may show her own reflections about suicide. Even though she never directly shows that she wants to end her life, the passage tells the reader about her ideas. Because she feels so lonely and lost in her new world, she has also lost her grip on how to handle everyday life. By emptying her entire body of blood, she would not have to worry about this anymore. She has an option, and by not committing suicide she actually decides to look at the bright sides of her new life which she eventually starts to enjoy.

Nazneen is shown to have some of the same thoughts through the use of the symbol of the wardrobe. Throughout the novel, this black wardrobe in the bedroom is troubling Nazneen. She compares it to a sin, and keeps dreaming about it. In one of her dreams, she is locked inside it as it falls down and crushes her. The closet is almost like a coffin, and represents death in the novel. Nazneen also says that she hates the wardrobe, but that this fact has not made any impression on her husband Chanu. I find this to be a symbol of Nazneen's loneliness. She is alone and locked inside a place where she does not wish to be. And even though this is a thing she really does not want to be a part of her life, it remains. Nothing

changes, and as a woman Nazneen is unable to do anything about it. It seems like the wardrobe represents the changes never made in the protagonist's life. It was not her decision to move to England, and she cannot change it. Nazneen also describes her feeling of being trapped several times in the novel. As she has no choices, even if a hurricane arrives, she cannot move .

Nazneen is in many ways imprisoned in her community. It is not until the last part of the novel and the wardrobe is sold, that Nazneen's problems seem to come to an end. In addition to the already mentioned hawk in Nazneen's village, other birds are symbols in the novel as well. Nazneen dreams about her aunt's bird that everyone thinks will fly away, but never does. Someone eventually breaks its neck for it to never leave. Because it is dead, it is now trapped forever (217-218). Another bird described never leaves. Nazneen's sister Hasina tells it to fly away. Like herself, it should leave for a better future (335). The line between life and death is further described in Ali's novel. Though not verified, it appears that Nazneen's mother Rupban committed suicide too. Being a woman in Bangladesh certainly is not easier than being a woman in England. In a letter, Hasina writes that their mother threatened to kill herself if her husband took another wife. From a feminist point of view, the reason why Rupban acted in the way she did is obvious. Living in a marriage that includes other wives may lead to merciless difficulties and a feeling of loneliness. Her crying is described in several episodes of the novel.

Homburger Erikson is quite straightforward about the role of the mother in his *Identity, Youth and Crisis*: These mothers love, but they love desperately and intrusively. They are themselves so hungry for approval and recognition that they burden their young children with complicated complaints, especially about the fathers, almost pleading with them to justify their mothers' existence by their existence. They are highly jealous and highly sensitive to the jealousy of others. (177) Still, this description may be applied to the relationship between Nazneen and her mother in *Brick Lane*. Rupban does not explicitly show her jealousy, but she fears her husband will take other wives. She also constantly reminds her daughter Nazneen of what happened when she was born, and that it is because of her own wise decision not to take the baby to the hospital that Nazneen is alive. Rupban also often asks Nazneen if she is still glad she came back to life. What she does is what Homburger Erikson writes about: she wants the daughter to justify the mother's existence by her own existence.

Men are also portrayed in relation to death. Chanu tells his wife about a man killing himself over a girl while Nazneen wonders about a man from her childhood who committed suicide. When Nazneen as a child runs into a man hanging from a tree being punished for kidnapping a little girl, she gets to decide over life and death. She can free the man in desperate need by untying him as he asks her to do, or she can leave him to his destiny. In some ways, Nazneen faces the same problem when her baby boy is rushed to the hospital where he eventually dies. After the tragedy of Nazneen's son, her mother appears in a dream saying that Nazneen killed her own child because she interfered with fate by bringing him to the doctors. She had the possibility not to do this, and is therefore suffering due to her own choice. She chose to do the opposite of what Rupban did with her newborn daughter.

According to her mother, she chose death over life. At one point, Nazneen also believes that she killed her friend Razia's husband by momentarily forcing death away from her son. The concept of death which appears several times in the novel may indicate that in life, and especially in Nazneen's, everything can happen. Life is unpredictable for everyone,

but to the people moving from one country to another, the outcome may be especially hard to accept because of the cultural differences.

Nazneen is not the only person feeling lonely in Ali's novel. The readers are told about her sister Hasina's life in Bangladesh through the letters they send to each other. Even though she is living in her own country, Hasina has to handle a difficult and often lonely life. At the age of sixteen, she elopes with a boy from the village and enters into a 'love marriage'. But soon her life consists of rape, prostitution and abuse by different men. In many ways, the young Hasina accepts this life saying that it is a woman's own fault if she is beaten. At the same time, Hasina never gives up finding her identity as she struggles towards a new and better life, leaving her old ones behind. Nazneen dreams about becoming as independent as her sister (93-94). Through the letters from Bangladesh, the issue of physical abuse of women is also raised. Hasina tells Nazneen about her friend Monju who is in hospital because her husband and his siblings poured acid on her and her son whom they wanted to sell. There are many cruel fates for the women in the novel, especially for those still living in Bangladesh. These women have not physically moved to another place, but I find the scattering in relation to diaspora relevant here as well

Despite problems related to life, death and loneliness, the main characters Nazneen and Gabe are both left to hope in the end. During Nazneen's first years in England, she is always insecure about herself, and often changes her mind, fearing that people will judge her. Inspired by her friend Razia, Nazneen soon starts developing. Razia does not care much about what other people think; she dresses in a Union Jack sweatshirt, works, expresses her own opinions and takes care of her children on her own. Dr Azad's wife, although not a role model, also represents the modern, feminist, Western woman Nazneen eventually starts to become. By the end of the novel, Nazneen handles her life far better than her husband Chanu who struggles towards something he does not know, not succeeding in English society. The past and the so-called Going Home Syndrome control his life while his wife starts looking towards the future in the new country. As she moves forward, Chanu is moving back.

The history of Gabe also ends in a positive way. Even though his father dies, his Nana is sent to a nursing home and the plans about his own restaurant are not realised, Gabe now seems to face a bright future. By the end of the novel, he is talking to Charlie on the phone, planning to meet for lunch. He has also let go of Lena, finally a selfless act. After all, Gabe has faced and accepted his background together with his own identity.

#### WORKS CITED

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