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**FINDING THE ROOTS:
SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN MONICA ALI'S *BRICK LANE***

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Abstract

Monica Ali's novels have the strings of diasporic sensibility wherein the expatriate characters seem to find their roots on an alien land. Her novel *Brick Lane* has the setting of the gritty Tower Hamlets in London. The novel deals cogently with the issues of identity and roots on an alien land. Though Bengali migrants, in this novel, live and earn in that country but they are highly dissatisfied with the way of life Londoners live and the culture prevalent in England. The Bengali migrant people feel suffocation and identity crisis just because they have still Indian values and ethics. They back-pedal in London and don't merge with that culture. This is why the natives neglect them and don't consider them the part of that country. Nazneen, in the novel *Brick Lane*, is a traditional wife and she faces many problems of settlement there. She wants to go outside, she wants to learn English but her husband doesn't allow her to go outside of house. On the one hand, first generation characters want to have Indian ties whereas second generation younger characters try to copy British culture despite of the efforts taken by their parents. Thus, the settlement in a foreign country, London becomes a pain in their arse and an action packed times is waiting for them to stir their souls on this alien land which they considered their dream-land which keeps breaking their hearts though a bit but ceaselessly.

Key-Words

Roots, Identity, Cultural-clash, Hybridity, Gender-discrimination, Resistance.

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‘This is the tragedy of our lives. To be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy.’

— (Nazneen in *Brick Lane* 112)

In the shift changing world, the distances have been narrowed due to advance of Science and Technology, and people migrate from one place to another or one country to another in the search of better opportunities but sometimes this migration leads to many problems and dilemmas. The diasporic experience is the outcomes the disparate narratives as Bill Ashcroft postulates, “As historical experiences diasporas are made up of many journeys, interweaving of multiple traveling, a text of many distinctive and perhaps even disparate narratives.” (Ashcroft 47). Monica Ali’s novel *Brick Lane* also deals with the problems of identity-crisis, rootlessness and placelessness.

Monica Ali, a South Asian Diasporic writer, was born on 20 October, 1967 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her father, Hatem, was a teacher in Bangladesh and she has a British mother named Joyce who was a counsellor. Hatem and Joyce meet in a dance in England and fall in love with each other but their families do not allow them to marry. Hatem’s father has already selected a bride for Hatem. That’s why they have to marry secretly. After that they settled in Dhaka. The Civil War was broken out in 1971 and that’s why they had to migrate to England for safety purposes. That time the conditions were critical as Monica Ali speaks for London’s *Independent*, “When the Pakistani tanks rolled into Dhaka, and after a number of my father’s colleagues had been called to a meeting and shot, we used to sleep out on the balcony at night, fully clothed in case a knock came at the door.” They lived in Bolton, England where Monica Ali joined Boston school. She did her bachelor degree from Oxford

University and master and Ph.D. degree in English from Boston University. Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize for fiction. A film also has been made in this novel in 2007. Ali's novel *Alentejo Blue* (2006) is her second novel which has Portuguese settings. *In the Kitchen* (2009) novel is her third novel and her latest novel *Untold Story* has been published in 2011. She lives in Southern London with her husband, Simmon Torrance and two children Felix and Shumi.

The novel *The Brick Lane* is a story about a couple Nazneen and Chanu who have residence in Brick Lane, Tower Hamlets, London. Nazneen is a woman who is discriminated since her adolescence. Her father gets her married with a man who is more than twice of her age. After marriage she has to live with her husband, Chanu in England. When the novel opens Nazneen is shown burdened with her household duties, "It was the middle of the day. Nazneen had finished the housework. Soon she would start preparing the evening meal, but for a while she would let the time pass." (17). She has to start her domestic work early in the morning. She wakes up early and prepares meals for her husband, "When she woke it was almost four o'clock. She rushed to the kitchen and began chopping onions with the sleep still in her eyes" (22). Her husband is very strict who doesn't like lethargy in her domestic works and he wants everything ready in the home. He doesn't want any excuses for the delay, has given a burden of household duties to her.

If Chanu came home this evening and found the place untidy and spices not even ground, could she put her hands like so and say, don't ask me why nothing is prepared. It was not I who decided it, it was fate. A wife could reasonably be beaten for a lesser offence... Chanu had not beaten her yet. He showed no signs of wanting to beat her. In fact, he was kind and gentle. Even so, it was foolish to assume he would never beat her. (22).

Chanu thinks that his wife is a very simple village girl. To great extent, he is satisfied with the devotion of his wife to her duties. He praises his wife for it but he is not satisfied with her as she doesn't have any knowledge of English, Chanu says, "What's more, she is a good worker. Cleansing and cooking and all that. The only complaint I could make is she can't put my files in order, because she has no English. I don't complaint though. As I say, a girl from the village: totally unspoilt." (23) He thinks just to adjust with her. He vomits out his resentment in the proverbial languages, "A blind uncle is better than no uncle. Her husband had a proverb for everything. Any wife is better than no wife. Something is better than nothing." (23)

Though, Chanu lives in England for his professional reasons but he doesn't think that this place will be suitable for him in the long run. This is not his own problem of displacement and rootlessness; it is the problem of almost every migrant Londoner as they find the life

very different from their native country. Moreover, they don't find the place safe for their children. Chanu reveals his problem in front of Dr. Aziz, "Our community is not educated about this and much else besides. But for my part, I don't plan to risk these things happening to my children. We will go back before they get spoiled.' (32) Dr. Aziz also does not feel himself safe there and he also thinks to return India. When he says it so quietly even Nazneen could not stop looking directly at him:

I used to think all the time of going back...every year I thought, "May be this year." And I would go for a visit, buy some more land, see relatives and friends and make up my mind to return for good. But something would always happen....and I would think, "Well, maybe not this year." And now, I don't know. I just don't know. (33)

Thus, the 'Going Home Syndrome' (456) plays a vital role in the novel as the Bengali emigrants live in England but still their heart beats for rich Indian heritage. The central female character, Nazneen faces many problems in England and language is one of the major problems for her. She cannot speak English and that's why she intends to join some English speaking classes in the college but her husband does not allow her for that, "Don't worry about it. Where is the need anyway?" (37) Whenever she says to him to allow her to go outside, her husband does not allow her for it. He says that if she goes out of the home, the other people will say that his wife is roaming outside without any rhyme or reason. He thinks himself much superior to his wife. He says that she is lucky enough that she has got him as a husband. He liberates her to go outside 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 a luck." (45)

Chanu has a professional attitude and he keeps his wife at periphery all the time. He doesn't respect for her feelings. He always does what he wants in the home. He thinks that his wife should be kept like all traditional women in home, yet he expects her for her English knowledge. His wife does so much work for him but he never thinks that she may have also some dreams. He does not allow Nazneen to go outside, and he wants she may live only inside the house. When Nazneen proposes her to allow her to go for English clauses in college with Razia, he denies her for it on the pretext that she is going to be a mother:

Will it be all right for me to go?
'Where'. He rolled onto his back to look at her. His belly showed.
'To the college. With Razia.
'What for?'
'For the English lessons.'
You are going to be a mother.' (76-77)

He makes excuses not to send her to college to learn English classes. When Nazneen has delivered the baby and she says to go college to learn English, he says that how will she carry the baby in the college and he criticizes her for going to college with a small baby whose take care is not possible there, "Will that not keep you busy enough? And you can't take a baby to college. Babies have to be fed; they have to have their bottoms cleaned. It's not so simple as that. Just to go to college, like that." (77) He never wants that his wife may go outside for any purpose until it is very necessary. He thinks that people will raise fingers on him that his wife is roaming in the city, "If you go out, ten people will say, "I say her walking on the street." And I will look like a fool. Personally I don't mind if you go out but these people are so ignorant. What can you do?" (45) Though she lives in England still she is living her life like the Bangladeshi women do. There is a cultural difference in both the countries England and India. Bhabha writes in his *The Location of Culture*, "Cultural difference ...is not the acquisition or accumulation of additional cultural knowledge; it is momentous, if momentary, extinction of the recognizable object of culture in the disturbed artifice of its signification, at the age of experience" (Bhabha 126)

Chanu knows the bitter reality of lives of the immigrants. He knows it well that the life in this country is not so simple for the Bengalis. There is a clash of cultures in both the countries. That's why, in the search of bright future and high income, they have to undergo many problems and their life becomes a tragedy, "But behind every story of immigrant success there lies a deeper tragedy". (113) Chanu is aware of the fact that their identity is being dissolved in that country. He thinks that his children's future is not bright in that country and if need to stay there for a long run, then they need to assimilate in the foreign culture and this alien culture has no similarity with the Bengali culture:

'I'm talking about the clash between western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about the children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation encouraged by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the traffic struggle to preserve one's sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family. I'm talking---' (113)

Thus, as a first generation migrant, Nazneen faces many problems but other second generation Bangladeshis like Azad, Shefali, Bibi and Sahana have a different way to live their lives. They have mixed up with the British environment and try to imitate what the Londoners do. These second generation migrants rebel against the discrimination done to them. When Chanu tries to teach her daughter how to use computer and how to connect it with the internet, he finds them much advanced in the knowledge of computer. Second

generation youngsters wear jeans and short clothes which is not liked by the first generation migrants. When Shahana wear “her tight jeans” (327) and she watches some stuff on T.V. that her mother calls rubbish, she retorts saying, “How do you know it is rubbish if you even don’t know what it is?” (319) Shahana neither likes Bengali classical music nor she can write perfectly in Bengali. Her habits, clothing, attitude and way of thinking are like Londoners, “She wanted to wear jeans. She hated her kameez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them. If she could choose between baked beans and dal it was no contest.” (180)

Thus, the novel *Brick Lane* brings forth the issues of diaspora where the first generation migrants try to make way under critical circumstances to assert their identities while the second generation migrants try to strengthen the roots their parents have nurtured with great difficulty. They don’t consider themselves related to Bangladesh rather they think themselves only Londoners and reject all Indian ties.

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