



A Study of the Cross Cultural Language Issues in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract:

Indian Diasporic literature, with its presence all over the world, is one of the most relevant topics with interdisciplinary approach in world literature. With respective experiences, migration is more about losing and less about getting. The post-colonial phase of migration was witnessing a professional migration attracting skilled migrants. With the availability of functional jobs, the era experienced the outflow of such specialized migrants that were made up of almost permanent migration. The early and mid-twentieth century Indian diasporic fiction deals primarily with early immigrants. Questions of identity, cultural factors influencing language are some of the significant issues tackled. Nevertheless, the late 20th century and the 21st century witnessed an evidential shift in dealing with these issues. Both cultural and social factors drive the cultural shift, language shift, and development of identity.

With some pre-defined concepts of diaspora, the paper will include the perceptible shift from South Asian immigrants in Britain, in the context of language maintenance, and possible reasons for this shift by tracing the issues of culture and identity, in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*.

Keywords: Diaspora; Language maintenance; Cross-cultural attitude; Identity development

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. (74)

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Language is an essential device for communicating. It is best apprehended in K.G. Malinowski's statement: "Language is the necessary means of communion; it is the one indispensable instrument for creating the ties of the moment without which unified social action is impossible." (qtd.in Diamond 12). Language serves many purposes, and



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communication settles in its core. Its social nature springs up with the first civilization, emerging with the growing essentials of culture and fading with the diminishing culture. Therefore, language is primarily responsible for society's growth, and the language is as rich as longer the society exists. The practice of the native language as a tract through which information and knowledge are taught cannot be underestimated. The ability to read and write a language triggers its learners and enables them to participate and partake in essential roles at global level at institutions and organizations. Such individuals encounter vital progression in affiance for they manage associations, establish businesses, and participate in political institutions.

Language is strongly correlated to ethnicity. It defines a group and makes it possible for the group members to interact with each other and the outer world, perform their jobs, and conduct their business. The contribution of language is not just limited to social processes; it also affects the psychological practices responsible for the construction of ethnic identity. Carmen Fought notes that:

fluency in a heritage language can also be used to organize expectations about ethnicity within the community. Individuals who do not speak the language may find their ethnicity called into question. (31)

The colonial literature draws attention to Europe's economic colonization and the resultant destruction of the states and people across the globe, and Europeans practicing extreme power towards the latter. Although these issues demand great importance, it is equally substantial to recognize the cultural and precisely the discursive and linguistic practices that are associated with colonization. These practices highly contribute to assigning low status to the non-European culture and languages, including linguistic and cultural forms that appeared due to the colonial expansion, instituting the dominance and authority of the colonizer's culture and language.

Frantz Fanon "develops a psychoanalytic theory of colonialism, where he suggests that the European self develops in its relation and encounter with the Other (the native)". (qtd. in



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Nayar, 157). The term signifies that colonialism is the encounter/relation of the white and the native where one grows only in contrast with the colonized. The depiction of colonized as primitive resulted in the native's psychological inadequacy. The colonizing rulers and governments realized that the best way to gain strength is through psychological control, functioning and implemented through education system. The colonizers used to impose their native language onto the colonized. Some of the writers who were educated under colonization have examined humiliation faced by students while speaking their native language in colonial school.

Nazneen, the protagonist of Monica Ali's debut novel, *Brick Lane* (2003), had to live as an outsider or 'other' when she moved to Britain after marriage. The novel is about immigrants from Bangladesh to Britain. Nazneen was 18 years old when she got married to Chanu, who was double her age. After that, her journey from the lush green fields of Gouripur, Bangladesh, to the concrete one BHK apartment in Brick Lane, London, begins.

In his analysis of *Brick Lane*, John Mullan writes in his article 'Foreign Thoughts' that it is a "novel written in one language but supposed to be taking place in another. *Brick Lane* comes to us as if it were a work of translation. We have to imagine that most of its characters are talking in Bengali, even though dialogue is presented to us in clear English." (34). Ali has used modern English to represent the Bengali language and emotions flawlessly and smoothly, lest the reader forgets it. Through her uncomfortable encounter with neighbours, Ali has convincingly portrayed Nazneen's character that English for her is a foreign tongue. "Nazneen could say two things in English: sorry and thank you. She could spend another day alone. It was only another day" (19). These lines support the argument of language serving as one of the essential tools for the successful assimilation of migrants in the host society.

In the novel, Nazneen's Bengali separates her from other people in London. During her initial days at Brick Lane apartment, she felt like an alienated stranger. Through Nazneen's thoughts, Ali establishes that the main reason for her isolation is the lack of cultural knowledge. Her comfort zone was only the group of Bangladeshi women where she could speak in her language, celebrate and rejoice during festivals and visit her home and homeland down the memory lane. Outside this group, she was only an outsider who had no



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understanding of foreign language, culture, and/or people. Her life revolves around her husband and daughters, Shahana and Bibi.

MohjaKahf's book, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, also presents the concept of "a distinct narrative representing the Muslim woman's abides in western culture today." (1). The novel's foundational structure of the narrative is centralized to the westernized discourse on Islam, Islamic society, and the repression of Islamic females. The description can vary and might have different expressions; nevertheless, the core idea of the western insights of Islamic women can be considered as contradicting because their representation of Islamic women is of a victim and yet, they certainly are willing to escape the domination and subjugation exercised by Muslim males. In *Brick Lane*, Ali has shown the oppression of Muslim males on women through Chanu's psychological dominance on Nazneen, Shahana and Bibi, and Razia's rejection as a dignified woman. He is happy to have Nazneen, an 'unspoilt girl. From the village.'(22). She is an obedient wife, just as he desired. Through Nazneen's isolation and lack of linguistic knowledge, Ali highlights some traits of Chanu's character. His habit of quoting from Bronte or Thackrey and elaborating his arguments and then translating them into Bengali for Nazneen's benefit is actually the way of boasting his knowledge about English culture. It can also be considered as a form of cultural imperialism.

In response, Nazneen does not challenge his views. Although she psychologically dissents from the situations she discovers herself involuntarily. Ali depicts Nazneen as the epitome of an ideal wife. She is a subservient, passive, and uncomplaining audience of Chanu. The inability to speak or understand English was one of the most significant issues oppressing Nazneen. In his book *Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective*, Joshua A. Fishman specifies, "at every stage, ethnicity is linked to language, whether indexically, implementationally or symbolically." (7). Language is the most powerful and primary register of identity for any individual. The lack of knowledge pushed Nazneen to the Bangladeshi community who remained an outsider for England. Nazneen's yearning to learn English, not to depend on Chanu to communicate with the shopkeeper, her curiosity to read Chanu's books, and her interest in skating are some desires revealed with the progression of the story. These limits of language and discourse shrink when she is exposed to the world of



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English language, which Chanu never thought Nazneen was even required to be aware of. Her hold over language and financial stability facilitated the process of socio-cultural amalgamation through linguistic acquisitions in England.

Chanu is an educated man who came to England with the hope of becoming a “High Flyer, Top Earner, Head of Department, Permanent Secretary, Cabinet Secretary, Right-hand Bloody Man of the Bloody Prime Minister” one day (*Brick Lane*, 373-72). He is portrayed as a self-obsessed man who prefers to show off his knowledge wherever he gets a chance. Christopher O’Reilly’s *Post-Colonial Literature* talks about the critical issues of post-colonial texts, providing a sense of the cultural and historical background that has formed the subject. The book mainly focuses on how authors from once-ruled folks and races took and learned English language from the colonial masters and used it for their literary purposes, finally transforming it in the process. The later generations find the imposition of language beneficial and it is profitable in adopting new ideologies, culture, tradition, and language(s), etc., because it is understood that once a person starts losing his/her own ideology, culture, tradition, and language, he loses his own identity as well as space. In the first half of the novel, Chanu willingly detaches the family from Bengali traditions and prefers to speak English because of his self-obsession of being westernized. This sudden change was one of the reasons that Shahana and Bibi, who were born and brought up in Britain and have never been to Bangladesh, could never relate to it. However, in the second half of the story, he adopts Bengali traditional patterns and deliberately imposes them upon Shahana and Bibi. They are forced to learn Bengali tradition, recite Bengali poems and converse in Bengali. “This evening they were to recite the entire poem. Chanu was taking his family back home and Tagore [a Bengali poet] was the first step of the journey” (79). Ali depicts how Chanu’s forceful idea to learn Bengali traditions infuriates Shahana and results in conflicts and arguments with Chanu. This clash can be seen as the clash between the first and second generation.

Despite being educated, Chanu does not gain depth as much as Nazneen and Razia do. Razia wears ‘Union Jack top over *shalwaar* pants.’ (185). Her westernized appearance is an indicator, that ‘Razia is so English. She is getting like the queen herself.’ (185). The ill-treatment and discrimination of women has often been represented through the use of



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veil/burqa that also represents the dominance of Muslim males. Through Razia's character and appearance, the novelist suggests that she is abandoning the stereotypical Muslim dress code and learning English and adopting English ways for her successful amalgamation with Britain to open the new dimensions in life.

The development of characters is essential for the text's literary construction. The portrayal of Ali's characters represents the unfamiliar behaviour within the Bengali social culture. The characters are inclined towards their needs and desires, yet the real Bengali culture does not embolden infidelity within marriage. The concept of divorce or separation is almost unknown but if the situation occurs, usually the law does not favour the mother to take her children's custody. However, Razia, Nazneen's closest friend, does take the entire responsibility of her family in the absence of her husband. She is an exception within the Bengali community who takes this liberty to be the single parent. Rachel Lichtenstein, in her book *On Brick Lane*, delineates about Bengali women gaining independence and their development within the Bengali community on Brick Lane. (214). She lets Bengali females to tell stories of their gruelling journey and respective experiences of respect and freedom within the real Bengali group and the western culture in which it is shrouded.

Karim is a British born Bangladeshi towards whom Nazneen developed a physical attraction. He persuades Nazneen to attend a protest meeting that he has organized and she feels the urging desire to construct social and emotional ties out of her wedlock. Both Nazneen and Razia's journey of transcending the four walls of patriarchy, religion, culture, racial discrimination, along with an inclination towards her desire to amalgamate with the host society allows her physical and mental transformation. The oppressed personalities and lack of knowledge have damaging effects on how they perceive the world. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, G. Deleuze and F. Guattari state:

make language stammer, or make it 'wail,' stretch tensors through all of language, even written language, and draw from it cries, shouts, pitches, durations, timbres, accents, intensities. (115)



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The development of both these characters becomes visibly possible when they learn English. They got hold over things that were not accessible before. The language now bridges the gap between her and the outside world. Though immigrants suffered similar problems in settling in new countries, their conditions and situations may differ. Postcolonial literature talks about how ethnic groups in foreign countries has travelled a long journey of assimilation and worked hard in balancing their adopted culture and preserving their own roots.

In the paper, 'Towards a Theory of Language in Ethnic Group Relations', Giles et al. Defines "ethno-linguistic vitality" theory "which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations" (308). This indicates that a successful maintenance of their language depends highly on the perception of life and spirit attached to one's language. Nazneen and Chanu's migration to Britain signifies the movement of first-generation immigrants. The issues of differences in languages, cultures and identities faced by Nazneen are the problems usually faced by every first-generation migrants. However, when we move to the second generation, the story is a lot different. Both Shahana and Bibi, born and educated in England, feel a sense of belongingness with England rather than Bangladesh. They like jeans over salwar-kameez and prefer to talk in English than Bengali. Both the daughters and Chanu have a different point of view about England. In her article, 'Where I'm Coming From', Ali writes:

I was, apparently, an early talker and fluent in Bengali by the time we boarded the plane. My mother was worried that if the attendants at the airport or on the aeroplane heard us (the children) speaking in Bengali, they would keep us in Dhaka and not allow us to leave ... I still knew Bengali when my father arrived but it was not long before I was beginning to 'rebel' against Bengali. Perhaps I resented my father for 'leaving' us. I don't know. Nor do I know the exact point when the language was gone. There was certainly a span of years during which I understood but would not answer. (4).



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When Monica Ali left Dhaka with her mother and brother, she was only three and a half years old and fluent in Bengali but with time, she lost the grass-root knowledge of her native language Bengali. Ali has applied her idea and experience of Bangladesh, fragile native language and gradual amalgamation with the British society through the characters of *Brick Lane*. She tactfully portrays Nazneen's character, a rural woman from Bangladesh, to represent and differentiate between the native and the host culture. Through the character of Nazneen, the writer attempts to target the issues of language and identity that created conflict and dilemma within these characters. Nazneen's transformation is the projection of Britain as a life-changing space where she stands confident as an individual who chooses to live in London independently.

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