
Living with Belief: Politics of Religion in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane****Jahangir Khan***

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*Terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in September 2001 have spawned myriad discourses in various disciplines over the past eighteen years. Framing Muslims as a homogeneous and sinister “Other” of the West, much of the post-9/11 Islamophobic discourse slaps a monolithic group identity upon the Muslims and thereby ignore the diasporic Muslims’ heterogeneous lived experiences at the level of the individual and the family. Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* offers an alternative narrative to the hegemony of Islamophobia. By foregrounding the personal lives of the subalterns living as immigrants in the United Kingdom, the novel investigates various contours of the diaspora’s hyphenated identity. The politics of religion explored in the novel problematizes the monolithic Islamophobic discourse that lies at the very centre of the so called War on Terror. By using Althusser’s concept of Ideology as a lens, the paper investigates how the novel’s unravelling of a hybrid identity provides resistance to the Western hegemonic understanding of Muslims.*

Keywords: *living with belief, politics of religion, Islamophobia*

1. INTRODUCTION

The post-9/11 radical Islamophobic discourse developed in the mainstream Western media frame Muslims as a dangerous or suspicious Other. The discourse fails to empathize with the diasporic dilemma encountered by Muslim subalterns (immigrant women and children in particular) living in the developed North. Such an Islamophobic narrative feeds largely on the radical actions by a minority section of the immigrant Muslims, ignoring the lives of the majority who wish to assimilate in the West and are faced with a dilemma of diasporic life. The dilemma seems especially accentuated in the case of those who have newly immigrated to the West from countries usually considered associated with a radical version of Islam. Several Muslim novelists from South Asia address this lack of empathy towards people with hyphenated identity: Bengali-British, Pakistani-Americans or Afghan-Canadians *etc.* Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, by foregrounding the politics of religion in its narrative, especially in the life of the novel's protagonist Nazneen, offers an alternative narrative that subverts the West's radical xenophobic attitudes towards Muslims.

Since much of the post-9/11 Islamophobic rhetoric draws upon representations of the Muslims framed by mainstream media discourse of the "War on Terror" and prefers to slap a monolithic and homogeneous group identity upon Muslims. However, Muslim diasporic fictional narratives, subverting a homogeneous form of Islamophobia, offer alternative views of the Muslim diaspora.

Aiming to explore how fictional representations of diaspora Muslim community living in the West may offer a counter narrative to the

hegemony of the War on Terror discourse, this article attempts to respond to the following questions:

1. How does Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* address the issue of post-9/11 Islamophobia found in the mainstream media in the West?
2. How does Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* explore the relationship between religion and subaltern Muslim's lives living as diaspora in the West?
3. How does the novel's portrayal of Nazneen, the protagonist, subvert the hegemony of the War on Terror's narrative?

Delineating the aforementioned enquiries, this article will not engage in any discussion of the pre-9/11 ontological controversies of the colonial past that has led to the 'perennial' domination of the East by the West. Instead, it will limit itself to explore the fictional responses of the South Asian Muslim diaspora living in the United Kingdom. It will explore the meaning of diaspora life portrayed in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. More specifically, by investigating the protagonist Nazneen's lived experience in *Brick Lane*, it attempts to explore the politics of religion as a site for resistance to the hegemony of post-9/11 Islamophobic rhetoric.

2. Discussion

We live in an age dominated by a cultural hegemony of the post-9/11 rhetoric that has been shaping our subjectivity and defining our identity. Since fictional narratives may respond to Islamophobic rhetoric more imaginatively, understanding *Brick Lane*'s exploration of the theme of Islamophobia vis-à-vis the role of religion at the level of the individual and domesticity can offer a more informed understanding of the lives of diaspora.

Quoting Marx's notion about works of literature, Eagleton observes in his *Marxism and Literary Criticism* that '[to] divorce the literary work from the writer as "living historical human subject" is to "enthuse over the miracle-working power of the pen"¹. Once the work is severed from the author's historical situation, it is bound to appear miraculous and unmotivated'². Eagleton further observes that criticism should aim to 'to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the products of a particular history'³.

A sociological reading of a text is fundamentally a political and ethical reading, yielding meaning that helps the reader understand the text in the reader's own temporal and spatial context. Elleke Boehmer advocates reading a text in this way to 'keep a political and ethical awareness alive within a postcolonial reading, not to supply it as a mere adjunct or framework to a text'⁴.

Although the protagonist Nazneen's lover Karim epitomizes the stereo typification of Islamic radical found in the Western discourses of the East, the novel portrayal of the protagonist Nazneen character subverts the stereotyping. Towards the end of the novel, Karim morphs into a radical Islamist, grows his beard, covers his head in an Eastern fashion, and joins a radical Islamic group that struggles to fight for a revolutionary change in Bangladesh. In contrast Nazneen's portrayal underlies Ali's concern to explore the true nature and a more nuanced understanding of the relation between Islamic faith and its diasporic adherents in the West. Whereas the novel's first-generation diasporic characters (symbolized by Chanu and Doctor Azad) prefer to adopt a more secular and Western way of life, those of the 2nd and 3rd generation diasporic Muslims seek refuge in a radical

and politicized form of Islam to counter white racism and cultural marginalization. For example, after Karim has become Nazneen's lover for several days, he reveals to her one day that when he was at school, he 'used to be chased home every day' and people of his community were teased and beaten up the whole time when they 'got together', 'turned the tables' 'went everywhere together', 'started to fight' and finally they 'got a reputation'⁵. Kareem's inner radicalization mirrors itself in a change in his appearance and dress. Ali recounts that,

Karim had a new style. The gold necklace vanished; the jeans, shirts and trainers went as well. Some of the parents were telling their daughters to leave their headscarves at home. Karim put on Panjabi-pyjama and a skullcap. He wore a sleeveless fleece and big boots with the laces left undone at the top. The fleece and boots were expensive. Nazneen saw him running his finger over the labels⁶.

The greater strength of a group identity over a weak individual identity experienced by Karim as a diasporic child in London suggests his philosophy of radical Islamism. Through a change in Karim's appearance Ali seems to pose questions significant for the world diaspora in general and Bangladeshi diaspora in particular. Should the western culture serve for a binary opposition between Islam and the West? Should a second-generation diasporic Muslim turn towards his ancestral culture if he must promote his group or individual identity?

Monica Ali, in her acknowledgements in the novel highlights of disbelief in the new liberal cultural politics which waves the diasporic women in terms of unexploited immigrant exploited by the feudal structure of the Exotic East. The novel concerns itself with the exploration of changes in the Protagonist's life she experiences after her marriage to a much older

Bengali Chanu, and her unavoidable emigration to Brick Lane in London to live in a rented flat.

Brick Lane is clearly a postcolonial text as well when we apply to it any sociological lens. It explores the plight of the diaspora in a world largely shaped by the colonial structures and discourses ⁷.

Although Ali uses a realist mode of writing and applies a third person narrative, the story is primarily of a focalised voice of the protagonist Nazneen. Whereas Nazneen struggles in Brick Lane to live along with other low paid Bengalis workers, she is in constant contact with her sister Haseena back at home in Bengal where she later works as a labourer in a garment factory, then as a sex worker and finally as an Aayah in Dhaka. Signifying the exploitative nature of gendered labour for the majority working-class proletariat across the globe (from diaspora living in *Brick Lane* to the low paid female workers working in the East), the novel in this way only seems to look at the other side of the Global consumer culture paraded proudly by the new liberal cultural media. The joys of a few rich are rooted in the sufferings of unlimited number of unknown low-paid gendered labour from west to east. Viewed from this angle the novel subscribes to the Marxist worldview that the new liberal view of gender politics is primarily a form of false consciousness. Gender emancipation is fundamentally integral to emancipation of the labour class in general. Ali also highlights, through Nazneen's and Haseena's and non-unionized and informal labour, how women of the underclass carry the brunt of the Global consumer market. The novel is frequented with Haseena's letters to Nazneen. Haseena works as a machinist in filthy conditions for long hours in a garment factory in Dhaka. Her working-class condition is doubly marginalised because, as she writes in one of her letters explaining how she has to live in the miserable

conditions and has to eat ‘near tap. Everyone use after eating and is always puddle it never run off to drain. I close to puddle, and it shake with insect eggs...hatching’⁸. Similarly, Nazneen repairs trousers brought to her by Karim, both of them work as low paid immigrants in Brick Lane. Exploitation of the working class, particularly of the women folk from London to Dhaka largely goes unnoticed by consumers of the world capitalist consumer society and its cultural media. Life in Dhaka as it is communicated in Haseena's letters highlights the exploitative aspect of Bengali society. Compared with life in Brick Lane, life in Dhaka tells another side of the same sad tale of inhuman exploitation of the working class in a profit-oriented global consumer market driven by the multinational corporate structures.

Several contrasting events throughout the narrative emphasize an exotic religious and spiritual East and a normal scientific and rational West. The very initial events of the novel set a background against which the marginalized and dehumanized life of Nazneen is highlighted. Beginning with a short introductory narrative which gives details of the protagonist's birth under harsh conditions, the plot foregrounds, in the very start, the sufferings of Nazneen. Although it is quite evident that the newborn baby is in an urgent need of intense medical care since the child is almost lifeless, Nazneen's mother leaves the child at the mercy of chance and destiny instead of sending the child for a medical check-up. Nazneen's mothers naively supposes that ‘that way, she will be stronger’⁹. This unfortunate event is flashed back at several places throughout the story of the novel, and it serves as a tool to underscore, as is the case in a lot of diasporic novels, the difference between a backward global South and an advanced global North. As we find later, Nazneen admits the new-born baby, her first child Raqib, in a hospital to save its life, although all in vain. Whereas an un-

hospitalized and helpless Nazneen, born almost lifeless under the care of an illiterate midwife and under unhealthy conditions, survives in an exotic east. Nazneen's first child, born in Brick Lane and hospitalized well in time fails to survive and live. Similarly, Nazneen, while still living in Bangladesh, dominated by a series of patriarchal structures all around her, throws herself at the mercy of Destiny and agrees to marry Chanu, a man twenty years older than her, and with 'a face like a frog'¹⁰ for he apparently guarantees a better life when he will take her as his wife to London. However, there is one way in which the exotic east brings comfort to Nazneen. She frequently recalls to herself memories of the childhood she spent in Bangladesh. Her post-marriage life in Tower Hamlets appears boring and ugly when contrasted with her pre-marriage idyllic childhood in Bangladeshi village. The lost past is the only comfort she feels while she struggles to survive in her confined domesticity in a small East London flat. She is frequently visited by a nostalgia not 'any people in particular [...] but just people'¹¹. Whenever she feels distressed or dislocated, she seeks comfort in her past, 'drift[ing] off to where she wanted to be, in Gouripur'¹².

However, memories of the village back in the ancestral land may not always be soothing for a diasporic woman living in the global North. In addition, a sense of the transitory nature of passing time adds to the pessimistic note in her memory of home:

It was as if the village was caught up in a giant fisherman's net and she was pulling at the fine mesh with bleeding fingers, squinting into the sun, vision mottled with netting and eyelashes. As the years passed the layers of netting multiplied and she began to rely on a different kind of memory. The memory of things she knew but no longer saw¹³.

By underscoring the hurdles faced by Nazneen when she struggles to develop a harmonious sense of her past rooted in Bangladesh, Ali emphasizes the fragmented and broken nature of diasporic existence, and perhaps by extension of all existence in general. A text, when read from a political or ethical perspective, yields meaning that helps the reader understand the text in his own temporal and spatial context. Elleke Boehmer advocates reading a text in this way to ‘keep a political and ethical awareness alive within a postcolonial reading, not to supply it as a mere adjunct or framework to a text’¹⁴.

The Western domination of the global cultural discourse reflects itself in myriad ways, ranging from migration from the global South to the global North to the questions of the dress and manners at home. The novel frequently refers to such issues:

Suddenly, she was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well. If she wore a shirt and a jacket and a pair of high heels then what else would she do but walk around the glass palaces on Bishopsgate, and talk into a slim phone and eat lunch out of a paper bag? If she wore trousers and underwear, like the girl with the big camera on Brick Lane, then she would roam the streets fearlessly and proud¹⁵.

3. CONCLUSION

Brick Lane deals with the issue of how belief defines the diasporic Muslim identity, underscoring Islam’s relevance for South Asian immigrants settled in a secular Great Britain in age when civilizations of the East and West are increasingly getting intertwined and interdependent. Akbar S. Ahmed has explained in his *Postmodernism and Islam Predicament and Promise* that globalization seems to have influenced Muslim societies in two major ways. One,

the world is generally constructed by a pre-supposed Western centre and an Eastern margin. Akbar S. Ahmed believes that through the discourses of globalization the Global north has successfully managed to the East and ensured the 'triumph of the West'¹⁶. This domination has facilitated, Ahmed argues, a dehumanization of the Muslim identity in discourses patronized by Western cultural media¹⁷. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* offers a diasporic critique of the Muslims' dehumanization pointed out by Ahmed and many others.

Notes & References

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