

Gender Biasness and Inter-generational Gap in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

The roots of prejudice against women have long been implanted. Since ages they were discriminated by the society declaring the males to be superior and the females as subservient to men. The orthodox idea believed that women were meant only for doing household job, taking care of husband and children. In most of the instances men were considered the primary breadwinners and women were expected to stay at home to raise children, to clean home, to cook and to provide haven for their husbands. They were expected to follow the rules set for them by society and map their behaviour according to these notions. Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her book *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (72). The ideology behind this is women are not born inferior to men in any case but it is the society which has made them to think like that. The cultural constraints have so much deeply been injected that they never think to live life their own way.

Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* is the story of the life of protagonist Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman who marries Chanu, a man, double of her age and moves to London with him. The novel explores her life and adaptation in the community as well as an adjustment with Chanu. Whether she resides inside or outside her country the clutching always remain in the hands of her husband. The present paper is an analysis of the discrepancies in Bangladeshi culture between the roles of men and women, how women take on their roles and how they function in this context using Feminist perspective. It will portray the current position of women in the society and also the inter-generational clash. Despite various groundbreaking achievements by women in various parts of the world; women still remain confined to their homes and more so into the ideological products their culture expects them to be by framing themselves into the notions set for them by their culture.

Keywords: Gender-bias, Cultural constraints, Adaptation, Feminism, Bangladeshi Culture, Inter-generational gap.

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debut novel *Brick Lane* is the story of the life of protagonist Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman who marries Chanu, a man double of her age and moves to London with him. The novel explores her life and adaptation in the community as well as an adjustment with Chanu. After migrating to London the couple is trapped between the two cultures and the new identity in London brings a sense of alienation and isolation more specifically to Nazneen. Instead of being helped by her husband to bring her out of this dilemma he continues to possess and profess the same conservative, parochial and typical Bangladeshi ideology of keeping woman under male hegemony. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is not only concerned with immigrants experience but has so many aspects revealed, such as dilemma of identity, gender inequality, religious conflict and racism.

The roots of prejudice against women have long been implanted. Since ages they were being discriminated by the society declaring the males to be superior and the females as subservient to men. At the beginning of the nineteenth century women enjoyed very few of the legal, social and political rights. They were not allowed to cast a vote. Not only this people also had a biased attitude towards females in terms of education or employment. The orthodox idea believed that women were meant only for doing household job, taking care of husband and children. In most of the instances men were considered the primary breadwinners and women were expected to stay at home to raise children, to clean home, to cook and to provide haven for their husbands.

Women were always expected to remain obedient, earlier to their father and later after getting married to their husband. They have to do things according to the desire of their counterpart and to make them feel contented in every possible condition without giving a voice to their desires. Since ages gender discrimination prevailed in our society. Women were not given a chance to attain full potential. Charles Darwin in his book *The Descent of Man* says "Women are of a characteristics of...a past and lower state of civilization" (144).

With the dawn of the twentieth century almost every facet of the accustomed lives of woman, from the familial sphere to that of public sphere got changed. The rapid movement of people to other countries replaced the preceding stereotypical concepts. Women started stepping out of their homes to receive higher education, for the source of income and started receiving powers in their own hands.

The Room of One's Own, an essay by Virginia Woolf proclaims that men have and continue to treat women as inferior in every sphere of life. Woolf invented a fictional character as Shakespeare's sister to illustrate that her sister had a same talent of writing like Shakespeare. Because she was a woman her artistic talent remained hidden from the public and she died without any acknowledgement for her skills of writing. It is just because of the society's opinion about women that they were seen intellectually inferior to men in every ages.

The rise of the new-fangled generations of female artists, writers and professionals distorted the patriarchal social median across the globe. Women who were underrated for their comprehension and skills started receiving appreciation in the workplace marking a ground-breaking alteration in the

societal and domestic roles of women. Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her book *The Second Sex* "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (72). *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali also reflects the same position of women in the course of the novel. The protagonist, Nazneen after becoming a migrant not only have to adopt and imbibe the new cultural set up but also have to face gender biasness and inequality from her husband. Even after migrating to a liberal and open-minded country like London, the typical patriarchal mindset of Chanu, the protagonist's husband does not change, in fact he continues to practice traditional gender ideology. The present paper will focus on the problems of Nazneen who like the other migrant women's struggled hard to find place in the society. Not restricted to this but this paper will also highlight the gender biasness and inter-generational clash portrayed in the novel *Brick Lane*.

In the novel *Brick Lane* issues of three different generations of women's are dealt with, where some of the women have to lose something to gain something while on the other side some have to struggle hard to find a place and position in the society. The narrative of *Brick Lane* deals with the young girl Nazneen who grows up in Bangladesh deeply injected with the traditional concepts. Her 'self' is locked with the thinking that she has to bear all the pain whatever comes her way.

Soon after, when her father asked if she would like to see a photograph of the man she would marry the following month, Nazneen shook her head and replied, "Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be good wife, like Amma". (Ali, p. 16)

But later we see an unexpected change in her persona. Nazneen who was submissive, subservient and docile in the beginning later becomes assertive and independent both socially and psychologically.

Sometimes I look back and I am shocked. Every day of my life I have prepared for a success, worked for it, waited for it, and you don't notice how the days pass until nearly a lifetime is finished. Then it hits you—the only thing you have been waiting for has already gone by. And it was going in the other direction. It's like I've been waiting on the wrong side of the road for a bus that was already full. (Ali, p. 265)

Like her mother she also believes in fate and was greatly influenced by it. Her father arranges a marriage with a man named Chanu twenty years older than her. Though she does not want to marry him but being an obedient and dutiful child she cannot upset her parents. Seeing that they were already devastated by their younger daughter, Haseena's elopement. Nazneen marries a man of her father's choice burying her desires. But unluckily her marriage turns out to be unsuccessful. There was no love and passion between the two of them for each other. She is considered by her husband none other than a worker who manages homely affairs. He does not have a respect for his wife. Chanu says:

What's more, she is a good worker. Cleaning and working and all that. The only complaint that I could make is she can't put my files in order, because she has no English. I don't complain though. As I say, a girl from the village: totally unspoilt. (Ali, p. 23)

Nazneen feels suffocated in her loveless marriage where she is treated none other than a missing being but she convinces herself by saying that it must have been her fate. She was told by her mother in her childhood that "what could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne."

A woman is brought up from her childhood to believe that she exists only as a daughter, wife and mother to please men. The men are the wage earners, decision makers and women are expected to remain at home and do menial jobs taking care of children and husband. Chanu also has the same stereotypical mindset that he is the main source of income and expects her wife to obey all the commands given by him. He loved to share his thoughts and views on all kind of matters with Nazneen but never allows her to express her own insight on anything.

He talked and she listened. Often she had the feeling he was not talking to her, or rather that she was only part of a large audience for whom the speech was meant. He smiled at her but his eyes were always searching, as if she were a face in the crowd singled out for only a moment (Ali, p. 42).

The experience of being a migrant resulting alienation and isolation has already tormented Nazneen a lot but her problem does not end here. As Nazneen has migrated from Bangladesh where not only the culture, custom and traditions were different from London but also the language. Problem of inability to speak the English language comes her way. The protagonist wants to learn the host language by joining English speaking course but Chanu will not permit her. He knows that language is a great weapon and if his wife gets well acquainted with the foreign language then this will be the first key to open the door for her to the surrounding host culture. Chanu will not be able to put restrictions on her and stop her from stepping out of the cage which is constructed by him for Nazneen. She will get accustomed to the new liberal ambiance of London and will try to adapt it and change herself accordingly. Unwillingly Nazneen has to accept the commands given by Chanu and her fate without any resistance. The protagonist of the novel believes that women are born to bear low status in life. Women are never expected to object or raise questions. They are taught from their childhood to bear, adjust and be patient. Even Chanu like the rest of the men wants to keep his wife within the confines of four walls.

'You're going to be a mother...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'. (Ali, p. 77)

Financial independence is another basic requirement for attaining respect in the society and to achieve psychological independence. Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* says "A woman has got to be able to say and not feel guilty, Who am I, And what do I want out of life? She mustn't feel selfish and neurotic if she wants goals of her own, outside of husband and children" (25).

In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* Chanu was not able to get a good job in London in spite of living there for many decades. Nazneen shows her interest to do a job

to support her family but Chanu was not in favour of his wife's stepping out bringing money to home. For him women working outside home bringing money to run the household is to bring shame from the society which projects Chanu's innate patriarchal ideology present in his genes. Chanu earlier too was not in favour of Nazneen's stepping out and doing a job. Lastly, he gives permission to his wife to begin working as a garment worker when they were in dire need of money to run the household that too under his surveillance.

Men and women keep separate here. No men doing machining. Men they cannot sit quiet so long. They have to fidget and talk and walk around smoking. They make pattern and cut cloth these are difficult job. Also they iron. That job too dangerous for woman we do not understand electricity. (Ali, p. 152)

Being born a woman is in itself a great stigma attached to Nazneen but her problem doubles when she was unable to give birth again to a baby boy. Her husband longed for a baby boy but unfortunately she could not produce it again. Chanu has a typical male mindset that it is only the boys who can keep their names alive. The outcome of this was he turns out to have very indifferent attitude towards his baby girl's. In fact his attitude towards Nazneen also worsens and he becomes more bitter towards her and blames her for her incapability to give birth to a boy. When the girls Shahana and Bibi mature they want to take their decisions by themselves but Chanu does not give them freedom. At times it becomes very irritating for the two daughters to breath in such a suffocating environment.

The liberal atmosphere of London had a great impact on the them. Since childhood they were brought up in London and had received Western education which helped them to become bold and brave. Their persona presents a foil to the character of Nazneen. When Nazneen was of her daughter's age she would not dare to speak loud and rebel against her parents. Shahana wants to follow the fashion trend of London by getting a tattoo and lip ring but is not allowed by her father. This inter-generational clash and the stereotypical state of mind brings rift between the father and the daughter who demands freedom of choice and expression. Shahana says "It's my body" (292) which projects Shahana was more independent in her consciousness than her mother.

Witnessing these changes among his daughters temperament, Chanu makes up his mind to go back to his own country. For Chanu England is temporary place to earn, save and get back to the homeland. For the first time in the novel Nazneen's 'self' awakes. She knows that her daughters are brought up in the liberal atmosphere of London that will bring problem to adjust in Bangladesh. Shahana and Bibi unlike their father Chanu do not wish to go back to Bangladesh because they cannot relate themselves to a country which they have never been to even once. "I'm not going, said Shahana. I'll runaway" (Ali, p. 175).

Nazneen had lived a suffocating life with her husband believing it must be her fate. She devotes whole her life in thinking about family and husband but has never given a voice to her desires. After going through such a turmoil Nazneen

does not want for her daughters to go through the same quandary and trouble. The love and concern for her daughter's make her bold and out-spoken to show her disfavour to go back to Bangladesh with Chanu. Nazneen says:

Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. 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. Shahana did not care. Shahana did not want to go back home. (Ali, p. 144)

Nazneen's meeting with Karim, a garment boy whom she met in her sewing job brought new meaning to her life. Life becomes full of passion and happiness. He gives her space to articulate and present her views on the issues unlike Chanu who always expects her to listen like an audience. Karim says:

"You're always working", he said.

"Buttons will not sew themselves."

"Talk to me. Leave it."

"I will listen. You talk." (Ali, p. 261)

Moreover, Karim lets her feel that she has said something significant. Nazneen had never got an encouragement from her husband like Karim. She has suppressed her feelings for many year. She has never felt so contented in the company of her husband like she felt with Karim. Life which was going irksome turns out to be very delightful in the companionship of Karim. His friendship helped her to forget about all the agonies that were there in her life. She starts realizing her potential thinking that female is capable enough to lead their life alone.

It would be too difficult, said Nazneen, for us to be together. So I think we had better stop now.

Karim began to say 'right' again, but caught himself. Yes, I see what you mean. With the children and everything.

I have to think of them first (Ali, p. 452).

Nazneen later apprehends that she can live her own life happily with her daughters without anyone's support and not relying on anyone else.

The complication of the protagonist, Nazneen's life offered by Monica Ali is worth appreciable as it has exposed a genuine picture of the females in the society. Women who submits herself wholly and completely to men but did not receive respect and love which they really deserves. Like Nazneen in *Brick Lane* is treated by her husband none other than a maid who fulfils everyone's desire but in most of the instances has to strangle her own desires. But even after so many compromises and responsibilities if something bad occurs it is she who is answerable and blamed for it. Women are not born inferior to men in any case but it is the society which has made them to think like that. The cultural constraints have so much deeply injected that they never think to live life in their own way. Similar is the case of Nazneen presented by Monica Ali but as the novel progresses we see a gradual change in her personality gaining independent 'self'. So we can say that the core belief of feminist theory and criticism rests on the

equality of men and women politically, socially and economically. As long as women do not have consciousness of independent 'self' they will persistently be dominated by men.

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