

---

## **Monica Ali's "Brick Lane": A feminist Perspective.**

**Manab Pratim Das**

*Lecturer in English, A.R.B.Academy, Pathsala*

Feminism as a literary theory entered academic circle in the late 1960's with the arrival of post-structuralism. Feminism articulates political opposition to the subordination of women as women, whether that subordination is ascribed by law, imposed by social convention, or inflicted by individual men and women. Feminism is to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. In this sense, Monica Ali, a British novelist of Bangladeshi origin, seems to be a feminist challenging the gendered notion of 'women as mere objects'. In a patriarchal society, a woman is one who is neither a Male or a Man. She is the Other. And the writers relating to feminism bring out the discrimination between the Male and the Other, between the marginal (women) and the founders of patriarchy. My attempt, in this Research Paper, is to present Monica Ali's female protagonist Nazneen in "Brick Lane" and to show how she concerns herself with the problems of women. This paper also throws light of her quest for identity. Ali's protagonist Nazneen is crushed under the weight of a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. Monica Ali's honest portrayal of the disappointments and frustrations of her protagonist makes the novel more susceptible to treatment from the feminist angle.

Monica Ali was born in 1967 in Dhaka, then part of East Pakistan to a Bengali father and English mother. During the war of independence in 1971 the Ali family managed to escape to Britain, where they settled and ran a shop selling jewellery and trinkets for a short time. Later her father taught for the Open University and her mother became a counselor. Monica Ali started writing short stories after the birth of her first child and her first novel "Brick Lane" took her eighteen months to finish. Five months before publishing Brick Lane, in the January 2003, Ali was listed as one of the best young British novelists, which increased the interest of media. In Britain alone the book was sold 150,000 copies in hardback. It was translated into 25 languages. In her interview in the Gardian, Ali places herself neither to the British nor to the Bangladeshi Community, her position is in her own words, 'on the far side of two Cutlers'. Her novel "Brick Lane" was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Monica Ali is also the author of "In the kitchen", "Untold Story" and "Alentijo Blue."

"Brick Lane" – named after Brick Lane, a street at the heart of London's Bangladeshi Community – follows the life of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman who moves to Tower Hamlets in London at the age of eighteen years. She entered into arranged marriage to marry an older man, Chanu, twice of her age. In 1985, at age 18, Nazneen marries Chanu 22 years older whom she had never seen, a man who had been living in England since the early 1970s. When Nazneen is 21 she bears a son who dies after a year and then she has two daughters. Nazneen's only contact with home is the letters she exchanges with her sister Hasina. Through these letters, author Ali shows the similarities and Contrast in the lives of Nazneen and Hasina, both subservient to their husbands and like other Bengali wives, powerless to control their fates in the culture in which they live. Her life, at first, is confined, no shopping and no going outside alone. She speaks only two things in English: sorry and thank you. She

speaks little English and what she does see of British culture bewilders her. But unlike her husband Chanu Nazneen is practical and wise, and befriends a fellow Asian girl Razia. Razia helps Nazneen understand the strange ways of her new life and British home. Nazneen's life in London's Tower Hamlet is, on the surface, calm. For years, keeping house and rearing children, she does what is expected of her. Yet Nazneen walks a tightrope stretched between her daughters' embarrassment and her husband's resentments. Into the fragile peace walks Karim, a young man with revolutionary dreams who yearns to direct the local Muslim population away from secularization and back to strict religious traditions. Karim challenges Nazneen in a way that causes her to redefine her personal priorities and acceptance of fate's directives. On a background of racial conflict and tension, they embark on a love affair that forces Nazneen finally to take control of her fate. Karim sets questions before her of longing and belonging to opens her eyes and directs her gaze-but what she sees, in the end, comes as a surprise to them both. Beautifully rendered and by turns, both comic and deeply moving "Brick Lane" establishes Monica Ali as one of the most exciting new voices in fiction.

In her book "Sexual Politics" Millet announces her view that patriarchy subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male and this power is exerted, directly or indirectly, in civil and domestic life to constrain woman. Millet borrows from social science important distinction between sex and gender, where sex is determined biologically but "gender" is a psychological concept which refers to culturally acquired identity. She recognizes that women as much as men perpetuate these attitudes and the acting out of these sex roles in the unequal and repressive relations of domination and subordination is what Millet call 'sexual politics'. Nazneen, the protagonist of "Brick Lane" also endures everything, remembering her mother's words, "if God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men". When Nazneen's father asks her to see a photograph of her future husband, Nazneen shakes her head and replies "Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma". But as Nazneen turns to go she happens to see the photograph of her would-be husband. The man she is to marry is old. At least forty years old. He has a face like a frog. After their marriage her husband will take Nazneen back to England with him.

Nazneen enters into an arranged marriage and is transported to a tiny, cluttered flat in London's Tower Halmets, a Bengali Muslim enclave. Chanu, Naznenn's husband is an educated but impractical man. He borrows money and leaves his wife to deal with the usurer. Nazeen does not get chance to learn English language because Chanu thinks that Nazneen does not need it. Nazeen's husband appears to have no common sense, but does possess an enormously inflated ego. He is not a bad man, but he is pompus and he loves to hear himself talk. Ali beautifully creates Chanu, the patriarch of the family. Chanu needs his wife to cut his hair, his nails, and his corns, clip nose hairs, feed him, keep his apartment clean, wash his cloths and to bear his children. Nazeen becomes the submissive partner.

As Nazneen grows she heard many times the story of 'How you were Left to your Fate'. When Nazneen was born she was very weak, Banesa an elderly woman advises that Nazneen should be taken to hospital. But Nazneen's mother Rupban holds her daughter to her breast and rejects the proposal. Rupban, Nazneen's mother, says-"we must not stand in the way of Fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against

Fate. That way, she will be stronger”. It is because of her mother’s decision that Nazneen lives to become a wide-faced watchful girl. Fighting against one’s Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, or perhaps most times it can be fatal. Not once does Nazneen questions the logic of the story of ‘How you Were left to your Fate”.

In “Brick Lane” Monica Ali deals with woman’s situation in an immigrant society. Whatever the novel is about, there is a theme of feminism in the novel. Throughout the novel readers observe Nazneen’s life and her conditions in a male-dominated patriarchal society. In the novel Chanu claims himself to be westernized but in a telephone conversation overheard by Nazneen shortly after their wedding he describes his wife in the traditional manner as a commodity at the market, and not as a human being : “ Not beautiful, but not so ugly either. The face is broad, big forehead. Eyes are a bit too close together”. Chanu again says:”Not tall, not short. Around five feet two. Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough , I think to carry children. All things considered I am satisfied. Perhaps when she gets older she will grow a beard on her chin, but now she is only eighteen. And a blind uncle is better than no uncle. I waited too long to get a wife”. Nazneen lives in an isolated and lonely world which is unaffected by the events outside of the Tower Hamlets in East London, where she resides and spends her days alone in a small rented council flat. Nazneen is a moth surrounded by a shell of fate, religious hypocrisy and male-dominated society. But, towards the end of the novel Nazneen goes through a kind of transformation in her life which turns her into a butterfly. In this sense, the presentation of Nazneen, the central character is metamorphosis from a naive housewife to a new woman. In a larger sense, “Brick Lane” is a story about Nazneen’s destiny and freedom, acceptance and resistance and the hidden depths of strength. At the beginning of the novel Nazneen is hardly of her values and qualities. Towards the end of the values Nazneen proves her quality as strong, independent and proud woman. Karim plans to marry Nazneen after Chanu leaves for Bangladesh, but she refuses. She also refuses to depart with her husband and follow his plan of her life. Nazneen ultimately finds the strength to shape her own destiny. Nazneen stays in England along with her daughters and starts working with Razia as joint forces. They collect order from the boutique of England directly without the help of any man. The novel ends with an image of a sari-wearing ice-skating woman- Nazneen, firmly on her feet but preparing for her new world.

#### REFERENCES:

- i. Ali, Monica. Brick Lane, New York: Scribner, 2003.
- ii. Said, Edward. Orientalism, Penguin Books, 2001.
- iii. Gandhi, Leela. Post Colonial Theory: A critical Introduction. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. New Delhi, OUP, 2002.
- iv. Hussain, Yasmeen. Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Electricity, Hampshire, Ashgate. 2005.
- v. Hasan, Mahmudul. “Book Review Bricks Lane by Monica Ali”. Web 23 September 2013.