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“Cultural Identity and Assimilation of South Asian Diaspora in Host Country: A Critical Study of Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*”

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ABSTRACT

Monica Ali's novel Brick Lane explores the complex theme of assimilation of characters in a host country, focusing on the experiences of the Bangladeshi protagonist, Nazneen, as she navigates life in East London. Through Nazneen's experiences, Ali explores the tension between preserving one's cultural heritage and adapting to a new environment. The backdrop of Brick Lane, a vibrant and diverse neighborhood in London, provides a rich tapestry of cultures and characters. Through Nazneen's interactions with her neighbors, coworkers, and friends, the novel showcases the challenges and rewards of assimilation. It highlights the importance of community and the role it plays in the integration process. Throughout the narrative, Monica Ali skillfully portrays the complexities of assimilation. She depicts the clash of cultures, the struggle for identity, and the desire for acceptance. As Nazneen embraces elements of British culture while holding onto her Bangladeshi heritage, readers witness the intricate dance of assimilation in a multicultural society. Brick Lane offers a poignant exploration of the assimilation of characters in a host country, using the character of Nazneen as a lens through which to examine this process. It underscores the resilience of immigrants, the evolution of personal identity, and the power of community in the face of cultural change. The aim is to further examine the theme of cultural identity as shown in Ali's novel, while also placing it within the framework of Bhabha's theories on cultural identity. Furthermore, this analysis is grounded in the perspective of certain cultural theorists who posit that the connection between individuals and their surroundings is not inherently inherent, but rather formed and reformed through a multitude of social connections and their interplay in both ordinary conversations and exceptional circumstances, such as displacement, migration, and forced removal.

1. Introduction

Brick Lane by Monica Ali tells the story of a young Bangladeshi woman named Nazneen who moves to London to marry a much older man, Chanu. Nazneen is sent to London as part of an arranged marriage and is initially unhappy with her new life, feeling homesick and isolated. Nazneen's life becomes more complex as she navigates her relationship with Chanu, raises their children, and becomes involved with a younger man, Karim. The novel explores themes of cultural identity, love, loss, and the immigrant experience in London. It analyses the research question, "Why does the protagonist in the novel *Brick Lane* assimilate cultural identity in the new host country? And does she succeed or fail in doing so?" Set against the backdrop of the rapidly changing East End of London, *Brick Lane* is a vivid and powerful portrait of a community in transition

After WWII, a large number of people moved to Britain, and the country gradually became more diverse. While the entrance of the East India Company in the 17th century marked the beginning of South Asian migration to Britain, the [Independence Movement of the 1960s](#) and 1970s saw a dramatic increase in the number of South Asians moving to Britain. Mass immigration in the 1950s and 1960s was a result of the [Nationality Act of 1948](#) and the postwar demand for labor. This led to a variety of societal, economic, and cultural shifts. After World War II, there was a global labor shortage that necessitated the relocation of labor from developing nations to industrialized nations. In the United Kingdom, people from South Asian countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan) are

known as the South Asian Diaspora. They were the "beachhead" of a "chain of migration" that grew into a "large immigration stream" in the 1960s ([Kivisto, 2002, p.140](#)). While dealing with the strains of colonialism and immigration, these uprooted individuals seek inner peace by building their sense of identity.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To explore how postcolonial ambivalent identities are constructed and depicted in the selected novels.
- To critically analyze the representation of liminal spaces in the selected novel, identifying how these spaces contribute to the characters' experiences of displacement, transition, and transformation in the context of postcolonial migration and multicultural environments.
- To delve into the diasporic experience as portrayed in the novel, analyzing how characters' relationships with their home countries and host societies evolve, and how these relationships reflect the complexities of diasporic identities and affiliations.

3. Literature Review

Postcolonial ambivalent identities and liminality are related to the experiences of individuals and communities in postcolonial societies where the legacy of colonialism has left a lasting impact on culture, society, and identity. An individual can be said to be in a state of ambivalence when they experience simultaneous

conflicting reactions, beliefs, or sentiments towards a certain object. It is the sensation of having an attitude towards another person or item that is ambivalent, meaning that it can be either positively or negatively valenced at any given moment. Additionally, the word refers to circumstances in which a person experiences "mixed feelings" of a more general kind, as well as circumstances in which a person experiences ambiguity or indecision. Postcolonial ambivalent identities refer to the conflicting or contradictory elements of identity that emerge as a result of the intersection of colonial and indigenous cultures. These identities may be shaped by a range of factors, including language, religion, ethnicity, and nationality, and may lead to a sense of ambivalence or hybridity (Ashcroft et al., 2006)

The concept of 'liminality' originates from the Latin word 'limen', which translates to 'threshold'. Liminal space refers to the intermediate realm where cultural activities take place, whereby meaning is generated, as posited by diverse cultural theorists, anthropologists, and psychologists. The concept was first presented to the discipline of anthropology in the year 1909 by Arnold Van Gennep (Watts, 2013). According to Van Gennep, rites of passage can be conceptualised as a tripartite framework consisting of three distinct phases: separation, transition (also known as the liminal period), and inclusion. The concepts of 'liminal' and 'liminality' experienced a surge in popularity as a result of Victor Turner's scholarly works during the latter half of the twentieth century. Homi K. Bhabha, in particular, has emphasized the significance of border places as environments that serve as thresholds. Bhabha (1994) defines liminality as a condition or place that is transitional and situated between two distinct

points. This state is marked by qualities such as indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, and the capacity for subversion and change. The concept of 'liminality' holds significant significance within the realm of post-colonial theory, as it delineates the transitional space where cultural metamorphosis occurs and novel forms of discourse are constructed.

Liminality in postcolonial societies is often linked to the process of decolonization and the transition from colonial rule to independence. During this period, individuals and communities may experience a sense of ambiguity, uncertainty, and upheaval as they navigate the complex process of rebuilding their society and identity. Postcolonial liminality may also be experienced by individuals who have migrated to postcolonial societies from former colonial powers, and who may feel a sense of displacement and dislocation as they negotiate their position in their new society (Spivak, n.d.). When individuals migrate from former colonial powers to postcolonial societies, they may find themselves in a complex position. On one hand, they may benefit from certain privileges and resources due to their association with the former colonial power. They may have access to better economic opportunities, social networks, and educational resources than the local population. However, they may also face challenges and ambiguities in their identity and sense of belonging. Migrants from former colonial powers may grapple with questions of cultural identity and belonging. They may navigate a sense of not fully belonging to the postcolonial society they have migrated to, while also feeling disconnected from their country of origin. This in-between state can lead to a sense of liminality, where individuals feel neither fully part of the

local community nor fully integrated into their original culture. Moreover, migrants from former colonial powers may encounter resistance or hostility from the local population due to the historical legacies of colonialism. They may be perceived as representatives of the former colonizers, which can result in marginalization and discrimination.

The intersection of postcolonial ambivalent identities and liminality can create complex and nuanced experiences of identity and transition. Postcolonial individuals and communities may experience a sense of liminality as they negotiate their position in relation to their colonial past and their postcolonial present, and as they attempt to reconcile conflicting elements of their identity. The experience of postcolonial liminality for migrants from former colonial powers is shaped by intersecting factors such as race, class, and gender. These individuals may find themselves negotiating their privilege and positioning within power dynamics, while also facing challenges in reconciling their own identities and experiences. Postcolonial ambivalent identities may also be shaped by experiences of hybridity and cultural exchange, which can create a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty.

While the concepts of ambivalent identity and hybridity are often associated with postcolonial and cultural studies, there isn't a single prominent theorist solely focused on both of these concepts simultaneously. Instead, various scholars and theorists have contributed to our understanding of ambivalent identity and hybridity in different ways. Bhabha is a significant figure in postcolonial studies and is known for his work on ambivalence and hybridity (Bhabha,1994). He explores how colonial encounters produce ambivalence in identity and

how hybrid cultural forms emerge in these contexts.

Stuart Hall's work on cultural identity also touches upon ambivalence and hybridity (Hall,1996). He emphasizes the fluid and constructed nature of identity, suggesting that identities are not fixed but are formed through cultural processes that may involve elements of ambivalence and hybridity.

Fanon, a psychiatrist and philosopher, explored issues of identity and ambivalence in the context of colonialism and postcolonialism. His work, such as *Black Skin, White Masks* delves into the psychological aspects of identity and the internal conflicts experienced by colonized individuals (Fanon,2008).

Said's (1995) work on *Orientalism* and the representation of the "Other" in Western discourse touches on issues of ambivalence and hybridity. He discusses how colonial knowledge production creates ambivalent identities for both the colonizer and the colonized.

These scholars have contributed to our understanding of ambivalence and hybridity in different ways, often within the broader context of postcolonialism, cultural studies, or identity theory. Keep in mind that the study of ambivalence and hybridity is interdisciplinary, and various thinkers from different fields have offered valuable insights into these complex phenomena.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Ali, being a constituent of the South Asian Diaspora residing in the United Kingdom, possesses a unique perspective on the challenges faced by immigrant individuals in navigating their identity within the intersection of multiple cultural contexts. Ali is a notable individual who possesses a

wealth of knowledge in the realm of migrancy. As an immigrant, Ali possesses a deep understanding of the complexities and challenges associated with navigating between other cultures, nationalities, and religions. Indeed, she possesses a comprehensive understanding of the challenges associated with displacement. Ali's experiences upon migration involve interactions related to displacement, including the subject's ambivalent posture and the necessity for a psychically and psychologically formed space. Ali can be considered a hybrid subject due to her mixed heritage, with an English mother and a Bangladeshi father. The artist conveys her self-identification as someone who does not conform to the role of a cheerleader by incorporating elements of realism into her artistic framework. As the author observes:

A writer from a minority does carry an extra expectation of being a cheerleader for that minority. That's understandable. But I feel my duty is to tell the truth as I see it, not to be a mouthpiece or write a sociological study (Craig, 2003).

Brick Lane stands as one of Ali's most noteworthy literary contributions due to its depiction of the experiences of migrants residing in England. This study examines the representation of multicultural characters within dynamic situations, focusing on the concepts of cultural hybridity and identity creation within a novel social milieu. In this context, *Brick Lane* explores the challenges faced by characters who, having become detached from their native place, endeavor to adapt to an unfamiliar setting and assimilate into their new surroundings. Moreover, it can be argued that Ali unequivocally posits that "the collection of opposing viewpoints forms the essence of the

individual in colonial discourse" (Bhabha, 1994, p.110). The postcolonial subject has been crucial in enabling Ali to gain insight into the challenges faced by individuals in postcolonial contexts, as well as the dynamic nature of postcolonial circumstances. She challenges and transcends conventional boundaries such as those of nation, culture, and gender, and presents a liminal position that embodies cultural ambivalence and the concept of the third space.

The primary thematic focus of *Brick Lane* revolves around the intricate process of constructing one's identity and the act of traversing physical and metaphorical borders. The selection of the novel's title serves as the most effective means of emphasizing the objective of this particular section. Bricks serve as physical impediments, functioning as roadblocks and transitional zones for individuals migrating from one place to another. Brick Lane is a geographic area situated in London that is predominantly occupied by individuals of Bangladeshi descent. The setting serves as a symbolic representation of the psychological states of the protagonists, Nazneen and Chanu, who are the central figures in the narrative. These bricks serve as transitional artefacts for those who come to London in pursuit of improved living conditions. *Brick Lane* is a literary work that portrays the journey of a female migrant as she strives to attain personal fulfilment by becoming aware of her own capabilities. According to Toril Moi (1991), the individual's subjectivity is formed by continuous and indefinite contact between themselves and the external environment.

Brick Lane portrays the experiences of a Bangladeshi family

that relocated from Bangladesh, a former British colony, to establish their residence in London. The novel primarily focuses on the period spanning the final two decades of the 20th century and the initial years of the 21st century. The heroine Nazneen in the novel is situated in London, where she finds herself navigating between two distinct cultural environments, resulting in evident adverse effects on her social, mental, and physical well-being. Nazneen's life can be characterized as a narrative of personal exploration and self-awareness. As Arikan (2010) notes, her experiences in England led her to acquire knowledge of solitude, followed by an understanding of the importance of personal boundaries, and ultimately culminated in her discovery of a distinct form of communal belonging (p. 182). Nazneen's expedition of investigation and revelation has bestowed upon her a profound spiritual enlightenment and the capacity to sustain herself independently. She currently resides in a state of liminality, existing neither within her own Bengali cultural sphere nor fully assimilated into the Western cultural milieu, but rather occupying an intermediary space. From a Bhabhian perspective, the individual does not simply endeavor to create a hybrid identity, but rather seeks to construct a novel identity by amalgamating two divergent cultures. The concept of hybridity creates an opportunity for the emergence of a novel cultural identity, one that does not align exclusively with either the dominant culture (referred to as the Colonizer) or the marginalized culture (referred to as the Bengali culture). This new identity is made possible by the influence of metropolitan culture, which introduces an element of ambiguity or diminished visibility in

terms of cultural authority. As a result, the formation of Nazneen's new identity is not inherent but rather a product of construction and subject to external factors. Bhabha's perspectives are grounded on the examination of power dynamics between dominant and subordinate nations or powers in the colonial era. Consequently, it is possible to perceive the relationships between characters in postcolonial literature through a similar lens.

Initially, Nazneen is compelled to live a constricting and unchanging existence. Chanu serves as her sole link to the external realm. Nazneen exhibits a limited proficiency in the English language, while her husband fails to provide adequate support or motivation for her language acquisition endeavors. Where is the necessity located, if it exists at all, he informs her (Ali,2007, p.37). Currently, the television serves as Nazneen's sole means of accessing information about the external world. The primary lesson that she acquires from this medium is the aspiration for autonomy and alignment with her environment, akin to the ice-skater she observes on the TV. This skater possesses the ability to maneuver with freedom, while simultaneously maintaining mastery of her graceful physique and synchronicity with her partner (Ali,2007, p.41). Nazneen encounters difficulties in acclimating to the lifestyle of London, as she faces challenges in effectively delineating her own sphere from the external environment. In order to comprehend, engage with, and adjust to the new community, she must interpret her environment. The individual experiences a conflict between the location of residence and their place of origin, specifically between the communal and private spheres. Sewing affords Nazneen with a source

of financial sustenance and the prospect of transcending the confines of her constrictive household sphere. The act serves as a means for her to establish an authentic sense of self. Nazneen, who resided in a Bangladeshi village for a duration of 18 years prior to relocating to London and integrating into a Bengali community, is first depicted as a representative example of a Muslim woman subjected to oppression within the confines of traditional patriarchal structures. The selection of her spouse is determined by her father, and she is obligated to comply with her husband's requests without expressing any form of dissent. Nevertheless, the protagonist through a gradual process of self-discovery, leading her to make the decision to divorce Chanu, establish her own business, and construct a new sense of self.

The exploration of intersecting identities within the diasporic context, as depicted in the novel *Brick Lane*, gives rise to the phenomenon of cultural hybridity. Nazneen's identity defies categorization as wholly British or entirely Bengali. Hybridity, through its reliance on the negotiation of difference, serves to juxtapose the narratives of the home and host culture. Hybridity encompasses a state of satisfaction with one's own culture and an inclination to incorporate elements from a new culture, resulting in the displacement of traditional values and the adjustment to the novel environment. Unlike Chanu, Nazneen is prepared to incorporate Western elements into her identity while keeping many elements of her cultural heritage such as her prayers and her Quran recitations. However, she faces numerous challenges and problems while adapting the new culture. Nazneen's limited English language skills hinder her communication with

others, making it difficult for her to navigate daily tasks and establish connections with people outside her community. She also feels isolated from the mainstream British culture due to her conservative upbringing and the stark cultural differences between her native Bangladesh and the UK. This isolation leads to feelings of loneliness and displacement. Nazneen struggles to reconcile her traditional values and beliefs with the more liberal and modern lifestyle she encounters in the UK. This conflict is particularly evident in her interactions with her daughters, who are growing up in a very different cultural context. Nazneen's arranged marriage to Chanu, a man much older than her, creates tension within their relationship as they both have different expectations and attitudes toward life in the UK. Chanu's aspirations often clash with Nazneen's desire for a more independent and fulfilling life. Nazneen grapples with questions of identity as she tries to balance her Bangladeshi heritage with her new life in the UK. She faces pressure from her family and community to adhere to traditional roles and norms, while also being exposed to new ideas and opportunities. She also encounters instances of discrimination and racism, which further reinforce her feelings of being an outsider. These experiences affect her self-esteem and her perception of her place in the new society. The family's financial challenges contribute to Nazneen's difficulties in adapting to the new culture. Limited resources and low-paying jobs make it hard for her to fully participate in the consumer-driven lifestyle of the UK. As her daughters grow up in the UK, they exhibit different attitudes and

behaviors compared to their mother's traditional values. This generational gap causes tension between Nazneen and her daughters, as they are influenced by the British culture, they are growing up in. Initially, Nazneen lacks agency and autonomy, which contributes to her feelings of helplessness and dependence. As she gradually gains more control over her life, she becomes more empowered to make decisions for herself. Throughout the novel, Nazneen's journey involves coming to terms with these challenges and finding ways to adapt to her new surroundings while retaining aspects of her cultural heritage. The story explores her personal growth and transformation as she navigates the complexities of identity, relationships, and belonging in a foreign land.

It's important to note that while Nazneen embraces certain elements of the new culture, she also maintains a strong connection to her Bangladeshi heritage and retains some of her traditional values. Her journey is one of balance and integration, as she navigates the complexities of cultural identity and strives to create a meaningful and fulfilling life for herself and her family in a foreign land. Hence, her life might be perceived as a trajectory of cultural enlightenment. Bhabha argues that the concept of hybridization extends beyond the mere combination of distinct parts. Instead, it arises from the creation of a "third space" where elements originating from different sources converge, resulting in a reciprocal process of transformation (Bhabha, 1990, p.211). Nazneen attempts to navigate and establish her own personal sphere within the interplay of her native culture and the prevailing cultural norms. According to Bhabha:

The third space is an open expansive space encouraging the assimilation of contrary signs and metanarratives which obviously remain a necessary precondition for the articulation of cultural differences and the inscription of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1990, p.11).

Nazneen successfully navigates her way within the new cultural environment, ultimately achieving assimilation and integration into its prevailing values and cultural norms. The aforementioned result prompts us to contemplate the marginalized status of present-day immigrants via the lens of Bhabha's notion of the third space, which is characterized as an intermediate realm that allows us to transcend binary oppositions and embrace alternative identities (Bhabha, 1994, p.39). Nazneen has undergone a transformation with regards to her acquisition of knowledge pertaining to novel societal standards, other individuals and civilizations, and an alternative perspective on the global landscape. This marks her initial endeavor towards becoming an engaged and cooperative member inside the unfamiliar cultural context. The individual has acquired the knowledge that alternative approaches or solutions exist in every given situation. During her engagement with the third space, the individual acquires the ability to effectively acknowledge and accommodate disparities among various social and cultural collectives, so cultivating and embracing a novel sense of communal belonging and personal identity. The individual has acquired the ability to engage in social interactions within the framework of the new societal values and traditions. Additionally, she has developed the skill to navigate her personal identity

in a manner that is not exclusively tied to any particular group involved in the cultural exchange. The individual's newly acquired identity is the result of amalgamating her conventional cultural background with the contemporary culture she has encountered and engaged with during her residency in Britain. In the denouement of the literary work, the protagonist is depicted at a metaphorical intersection, symbolizing the pivotal moment where she must choose between adhering to her established self-concept and embracing a novel approach to constructing her identity.

A woman swooped by one leg. No sequins, nor short skirt. She wore jeans. She raced on, on two legs... She said, "But you can't skate in a sari" "This is England," she said." You can do whatever you like"(Ali, 2003, p.492).

Brick Lane represents the multiethnic, multilingual, and pluralistic lifestyle of its residents. It raises questions about the stability of modern British social space since it exposes the rich variety within British culture. Each character's identity, like the environments they inhabit, is depicted as malleable and subject to (trans)formation and change. Nazneen, Razia, and Shahana all live in a neighborhood that is transitioning from a predominantly one ethnic group to a more diverse one, and they all show varying degrees of acceptance and integration. Both the identities of these people and the environments they occupy are fluid and diverse because they are constantly manufacturing and reproducing themselves through change and variation.

The process of the protagonist's ultimate assimilation into

the fabric of modern British society becomes evident throughout the narrative of *Brick Lane*. *Brick Lane*, as an atypical postcolonial literary work, challenges the traditional dichotomy between Western and Eastern ideologies, aiming to foster a more inclusive and enriching multicultural society. In the end, Nazneen makes the decision to remain in England, despite Chanu's objections. Throughout the narrative, the protagonist Nazneen through a transformative character arc, evolving from a reticent and compliant individual into a self-sufficient and autonomous persona capable of engaging in activities such as ice-skating, dancing, and singing without inhibition (Ali, 2003, p. 489). Ali imbues her protagonist's lifestyle and experiences with Western influences, so granting her the agency to assume control over her own fate. In the last chapters of the literary work, the readers are presented with a scene wherein Nazneen engages in the activity of ice-skating while adorned in a traditional sari, exhibiting a notable absence of inhibitions. From a symbolic perspective, the skating rink can be interpreted as a representation of a new physical environment that Nazneen is able to navigate, while simultaneously preserving her original cultural identity symbolized by her sari, which is widely recognized as a symbol of the diverse cultures found within the Indian subcontinent. Through the process of merging these two distinct spaces, Nazneen has successfully transitioned into a third space wherein she may establish her hybrid identity, which represents a synthesis of the characteristics from both areas. This allows her to avoid being confined inside the limitations imposed by a rigid dichotomy between the two spaces. From a

postmodern perspective influenced by Homi Bhabha's theories, Nazneen embarks on a trajectory that initially encompasses submissiveness, representative of the colonized space, and progresses towards independence, symbolizing the colonizer's domain. Ultimately, she achieves a state of fusion and transcendence between these two realms, embodying the hybrid space, which enables her to attain self-realization.

5. Conclusion

Brick Lane serves as a symbol of the successful integration and harmonious coexistence among various ethnically varied communities. The portrayal of cultural identity in this context serves to recognize the presence of several identities within British society, while also noting the limited perspective of any viewpoint that fails to consider the influence of power dynamics, even within a society that upholds liberal and democratic values like British culture. The literary work portrays the cultural identity in Britain as characterized by heterogeneity and a continuous process of reinvention. The characters, including Nazneen, Razia, and Mrs. Azad, exist inside a hybrid realm that gives rise to a novel cultural identity characterized by its multicultural and multilocal nature. The concept of the third space facilitates encounters in novel national and geographical contexts, wherein individuals can navigate and reconcile the cultural norms of both their home and host societies. As articulated by Mrs. Azad, the act of adorning a sari and veiling one's head is customary during her visits to Bangladesh. However, I am now embarking on my journey to engage in professional activities. I am employed alongside individuals who identify as white females, and I am a

member of this particular group. According to Arikan (2010), individuals have the autonomy to decide on their personal preferences, such as choosing to consume curry upon returning home. British-born children, as well as their mothers, face the challenge of reevaluating and reshaping their identity in response to the phenomenon of intercultural fusion. The novel offers a perspective that combines elements of British society and proposes a fresh understanding of identity that moves away from postcolonial ideas of division and diversity. Instead, it presents a synthesis of identity that emerges through the juxtaposition of diverse cultures. The formation of new identities and social spaces is rooted in the concepts of hybridity and the third space, as theorized by Homi Bhabha. Bhabha views hybridity as a constructive force that challenges the conception of culture as a fixed entity, which bestows a uniform identity.

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