



“The Bricks will not Move”: Territory, Identity and Agency in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Monica Ali’s <i>Brick Lane</i> delves into the complexities of migration, identity, and selfhood through the journey of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman navigating life in London. Initially resigned to fate, Nazneen gradually asserts her agency, shaping her own identity beyond cultural and patriarchal constraints. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s concept of identity as fluid and Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of reterritorialization, this paper examines how migration destabilizes and reshapes personal and communal identities. In contrast, her husband, Chanu, clings to nostalgia and ultimately returns to Bangladesh, highlighting divergent responses to displacement. The paper concludes that, Nazneen’s evolving relationship with language, community, and independence, <i>Brick Lane</i> portrays migration as both a site of struggle and a process of self-reinvention.

In Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, Nazneen, a village girl from Mymensingh District undergoes the issues related to identity because of her movement from her birth place to London and takes up different identities with her every movement within Bangladesh and outside Bangladesh. The transformation of her identities can be understood through Stuart Hall’s idea that identity is “always in process” (Hall 222), never complete, which gets further amplified in the case of displaced individuals. Her diasporic consciousness entails a “pre-post-erous” (62) condition that as Radhakrishnan confers, “underwritten by a “here” and “there” (xiv). Nazneen’s identity can also be seen as a function of territory, especially in a diasporic condition of being away from ‘home’, in the realm of the alien i.e., ‘abroad’. Gilles Deleuze defines territory as “the domain of the having” (qtd. in Aurora 3), which seeks to differentiate based on what a group possesses, against the alien, the outsider, the one outside the boundary of the territory. The individual agency of Nazneen also plays an important role in shaping her identity. This individual agency though defined as the ability of an individual to act independently, is inherently tied to the identity of the individual which in turn can be seen as a function of language and territory. The identity of Nazneen is also shaped by these three factors and remains in a state of flux, as in the end she succeeds in “reterritorializing” (Deleuze and Guattari 9) herself and hence finds agency in her diasporic identity as a Bangladeshi immigrant in Britain. While her husband, Chanu remains tied to the territory of his past, finds the state of being a diasporic individual too difficult for him to cope with, and returns ‘home’, a defeated man.

Contrary to Chanu, Nazneen’s identity is a “‘production’...never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation” (Hall, 222), that puts the individual under a state of erasure. Nazneen throughout her childhood was told the story “How You Were Left To Your Fate” (Ali 19), and the training given by her mother serve as singular pivotal point of her life around which she revolved, therefore she believed that she “must not waste energy fighting against Fate” (Ali 18). She was married sent to London, with a man more than twice her age, but she did not complain for it was Fate’s demand. While her husband Chanu had been in England for sixteen years and had arrived with his “degree certificate” (Ali 34) high on hope, to find one or the other job waiting for him, which never worked out as planned; Nazneen had a starkly different arrival, crying on the aeroplane, while she was reminded of the foreign food by the cereals served as breakfast; and arriving with just two words of English in her vocabulary “sorry” and “thank you” (Ali 22).

This particular situation of the third world migrants to the first world (who are neither able to adjust in their native place nor in the first world) can be understood with the help of the concept of multiplicities and flights given by Deleuze and Guattari who propounded that, “multiplicities are defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization according to which they change in nature and connect with other

multiplicities" (9). One's movement through life or any territorial space can be governed in two ways: either by adhering to a codified, striating structure—akin to what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as "structuring structures"(72)—which the state apparatus imposes, dividing the world into arbitrary longitudes and latitudes and thereby restricting individual movement to a predetermined set of paths; or by navigating the landscape as it presents itself, embracing the fluid and unpredictable multiplicities of the terrain. While the first one leads to a habitual repetition of patterns acquired in the past, the second method leaves a larger gap between perception and action, hence a creative liberty, impossible in the first method.

Chanu's approach is that of the first type, where he keeps his intellect limited to history and a close connection to home, which he enacts through his information about "Paradise of Nations" (Ali 151) or his repeated exaltation of Bengali literature and which he keeps imposing upon Nazneen in the beginning and later, on Shahana and Bibi, his daughters when they are old enough to comprehend. His Hume, Euclid, Tagore, Hastings are all just the latitudes and longitudes that he holds on to, to organize his world, to keep the severed 'home' intact. Karim is another example of the same approach, his world is through and through, a product of his linear thought, which does not allow any space for fluidity or any other possibility else than a traditional view. He turns out to be the "new middleman" (Ali 172) in Nazneen's life right after Chanu had moved on from the role, to become a driver. Karim is not only the middleman who brings "bales of jeans on his broad shoulder" (Ali 172) but rather the whole tradition tied world, in which Nazneen fits as the "real thing" (Ali 312), the one representative of Bangladesh, his ancestral home on which he has never set foot; already- settled in London, this as Nazneen would re-member, was reiteration of Chanu's words, "An unspoilt girl. From the village. All things considered, I am satisfied." (Ali 170)

On the other hand of the spectrum is Nazneen, who never had plans or set pattern to mould the world into, rather her approach accepts all the vagaries of "Fate" (Ali 18), the supreme agent of flux and fluidity. The only friend that she had even after six months in the city was the Tattoo Lady, a fat white woman, whose only communication was waving and smiling, to which Nazneen, replied in the same vocabulary. Tattoo Lady in Chanu's view was "Hell's Angel", she did not fit into any of the pre-ordained identity groups that Chanu's limiting and limited ability to think and understand the word could allow. She was not a "poor" for she was fat, neither a 'white' for she was poor, and nor were her tattoos clearly visible from distance, while Nazneen would rather compare her "same look of boredom and detachment" to that of a "sadhu" (Ali 22-23). Nazneen assimilates in the society slowly, without a set plan for "respectable type" (Ali 74) people, or discrimination against "uneducated, illiterate, close-minded," (Ali 30) people as Chanu did. She learns from everything and everyone, she listens to Chanu's philosophical speeches, Karim's Hadith, albeit with a little more attention, and to the gossips of Mrs Islam, or friendly advice of Razia and Hasina and later on to her daughters when they teach her English or quiz her. Nazneen in turn passes on the oral stories to her daughters from her own childhood, in stark opposition to her husband's chosen means of dissemination of knowledge, a much more fluid form of narrative. "The first tendency connected with a territory is the resolution to maintain it, to defend its boundaries." (Aurora 3). Language maintenance becomes an important means of holding onto territorial-diasporic identity. Chanu tries his best to keep his wife and later on his daughters away from English, not just the English culture but language too. Nazneen was made to stay at home when she was new to the city, as one may interpret and seek to condone, on the grounds of her limited vocabulary of the language, but later on when she asks if she should go along with Razia, "for the English lessons" she is reminded of her, would be mother status, 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 69)

On one hand he wants to reserve the capacity to quote Shakespeare, on the other hand, he wants to keep Bangladesh alive in his home. While it could not be avoided in his daughters' case, as they were put into school, they were to talk only in Bengali at home, were made to learn poems in Bengali. Further, both Shahana and Bibi are coerced into reciting poems in Bengali in front of Mr Azad, almost as a display of trophy, just to impress the fact on him, that how authentic Bangladeshi they still were. Chanu keeps the "planning and preparations" (Ali 149) on so that "the rot [which was] beginning" (Ali 149) in the form of Shahana's resistance to learning Bangla or her refusal to recite "*O Amar Shonar Bangla*" ("O my golden motherland" the national anthem of Bangladesh), he had started taking them "back home and Tagore was the first step of the journey" (Ali 146). Chanu continuously defends his home, beats Shahana whenever necessary, calls her "Memsahib" (Ali 147) simply to signify how she was moving away from her intended home. This is what Spivak would term "history...turned into cultural memory", (20) while history remains far removed from everyday experience, cultural memory comes closer to the life, it is through literature that one exalts the past and tips the balance more and more towards Nationalism. On the other hand Nazneen's connection with home is established only through her memories or her sister's letters written in grammatically inept language, far from being a pink picture of her motherland, these letters portray the very nook and cranny of Hasina's bleak everyday experience.

Chanu arrived in London, with a degree of English Literature from Dhaka University, and on the other hand Nazneen learnt her share of English piecing it together like a puzzle, picking up pieces here and there: "Over the last decade and a half she had gleaned vocabulary here and there. The television, the brief exchanges at the

few non-Bengali shops she entered, the dentist, the doctor, teachers at the girls' schools" (Ali 159). She learns the language passing through the un-structured, "line of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari 423) rather than through a school, or an institution. It is because of this, that Nazneen adopts the culture of her new home so successfully and allows her daughters to be a part of the society as much as possible, equipped with "equivalence", which Spivak would define as, not equalization, it is not a removal of difference, it is not cutting the unfamiliar down to the familiar. It is perhaps learning to acknowledge that other things can occupy the unique place of the example of my first language (30).

Language shift plays a very important role in assimilation of a particular individual or group into a majority culture. "Language shift occurs because individuals, consciously or subconsciously, make decisions to use certain languages in certain situations" and "these individual decisions are motivated by what people consider to be their personal good" (qtd. in Hatoss 31). Nazneen's approach to English can be seen in her interest to learn the language, she tries to learn, whatever she could find in a magpie like adaptability to memorise words, repeating them; "pub, pub, pub" (Ali 37); "Hospital, hospital, hospital. She had another English word. She caressed it all the way down the corridor" (Ali 121), but this interest, this motivation does not arise out of void, rather she had felt the exhilaration of acceptance, of being understood in the 'Others' language. Nazneen leaves her home and starts roaming endlessly on the streets of London, and gets lost knowingly, trying to mirror the lost-ness of her sister Hasina in Bangladesh, regretting it though, she accidentally runs into a man from the subcontinent, and to his inquiries in Urdu, she could only reply with a "sorry" and "in spite of the fact that she was lost and cold and stupid, she began to feel a little pleased. She had spoken, in English, to a stranger, and she had been understood and acknowledged" (Ali 55-56). This experiencing of the city almost like a flaneur, as well as the ability to get acknowledgement on her own, beyond the limits of her 'home', both at the limit of her physical abode, as well as the limiting 'linguistic home' created by Chanu, turns out to be the pivotal point of Nazneen's life in the narrative.

Nazneen transforms from a village girl, who did not have enough words to even ask for help, to the one who could carry herself into a relationship with Kareem and then come out of it as well, when she felt she needed to, for the sake of herself and her daughters. This newly found agency, arises out of her ability to find "a place in the world," (Ali 61) or at least to imagine a place in the world, which she had envied once, both about Dr. Azad, and Karim and about which she got slowly but steadily disillusioned. Nazneen would realise later, "Karim did not have his place in the world. That was why he defended it" (Ali 363). Unlike Chanu, Dr. Azad, or Karim, her quest is not for a planned and "striated space" but rather that of a Deleuzian "smooth space".

Deleuze and Guattari...distinguish two types of space... a picture of space that is primordially cut up in various ways, one that includes intrinsic boundaries. This space is termed 'striated'. On the contrary...a space [that] does not have any intrinsic organization and must be considered to be open, or what Deleuze and Guattari call 'smooth space', but this space itself is something that must be created (Parr 186).

Nazneen starts setting up this space of freedom far away from the strict norms, and rigorous 're-member-ing' practices of Chanu in the beginning when she finds the flow of her desire in the form of an illicit affair with Karim, but later when she realises that she does not want another 'middleman' to negotiate with the world, she moves beyond the lure of being Karim's wife, which would yet again put her under a regime, of plans and future probable actions, one after the other. While Chanu leaves his family to return to his home, Karim follows suit, ["Karim? He went to Bangladesh." "Or he joined the caravan. That's what some people say." (Ali 393)] for he could never come out of the bounded mental space of clear boundaries, be it in gender roles or territorial identities. "Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew" observes Edward Said (168), it is a continuous negotiation that one has to indulge in, hence a simple "de-territorialization" (388), i.e. a movement away from a linear territorial identity would not help, one has to "re-territorialize" on this new 'terre' of flux. Salman Rushdie, notes about the diasporic condition, "Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools." (15), what needs to be problematized here is the fact that, he holds the mental space in a very striated way, bounded and divided, raised to heights, so that they have to be mounted upon, entailing an obvious fall or slip, sooner or later. Nazneen on the other hand, is able create a space, for her daughters and herself, which situates itself on the seams, accepting the space in between the two, entailing a nomadic state of mind.

Nazneen and her friend Razia are shown as successful entrepreneur at the end of the novel, leaving us with the image of Nazneen being brought to an ice-skating rink, Nazneen asks "But you can't skate in a sari" to which Razia replies, "This is England," she said. "You can do whatever you like." (Ali 397). This though is the same England, where Chanu, trickled down the social order, passing from the 'when' to the 'if' of the promotion to his resignation, all because of racist white people; similarly Karim had felt the racist and religious discriminatory pangs of this foreign land. Further, as the ending of the novel as well as the paper tends to suggest, one might add a feminist reading to the novels emancipatory trajectory of the female characters, but on the very same plane are other female characters who fail to reach the state that Nazneen is able to, this then

must be treated as an individual state of mind and effort. Again one by no means can condone or overlook racism, and neither does this paper intend to do so, but the fact remains that one must, in this globalized and cosmopolitan world, come out of the ghetto mentality. This is what Nazneen and Razia are able to do, even though they face their share of racist problems, their “reterritorialized” (Deleuze and Guattari 188) mental state, lends rich soil to the “rhizomatic” (Deleuze and Guattari 382) approach that they need, in order to be able to weave the threads of multiplicities.

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