



Memory, Home, Trauma And Diaspora In Shyam Selvadurai's 'Funny Boy' And Monica Ali's 'Brick Lane'

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Citation: Sonika Kumari, et al (2024), Memory, Home, Trauma And Diaspora In Shyam Selvadurai's 'Funny Boy' And Monica Ali's 'Brick Lane', *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(10), 638-641
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i10.9018

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The postcolonial cultural situation causes trauma and postcolonial fiction to become more indistinguishable. In postcolonial literature, trauma is often a central topic, especially in the works of British authors of colonial ancestry. As a multidimensional concept, 'home' has garnered increasing critical attention, particularly in Diaspora Studies. As a result of a globalising discourse, the term 'home' elicits a variety of emotions and feelings. Its meaning is not only affected by the location from which it is articulated, but also by factors such as ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Jasbir Jain contends in *The Diaspora Writes Home: Subcontinental Narratives* that when the diaspora chooses to "write home," "location, space, and time" disintegrate into multiple discourses. Writing home is not only a creative outlet for them, but also a form of connection, "as if answering a summons" (11). This paper examines Shyam Selvadurai's depiction of Sri Lanka in his novels *Funny Boy* (1994) and Monica Ali's depiction of Bangladesh in *Brick Lane* (2003) through the lens of Jain's argument. In doing so, this paper attempts to trace Ali and Selvadurai's fluctuating relationship with their native countries, Sri Lanka, and to problematize the use of memory, history, trauma, and dislocation in their respective narratives. It also attempts to interpret their representations considering their own emotional and intellectual understanding of the sociopolitical turmoil in his country. In this paper, I contend that both texts present two significant modes of postcolonial memory: first, the nostalgic mode, a form of nostalgia for a fleeting colonial past that plagues the cultural consciousness of colonial sympathisers in the novel. The second mode is traumatic retrospective.

Keywords -home, ethnicity, representation, memory, trauma,

Introduction

"Funny Boy," written by Sri Lankan-Canadian author Shyam Selvadurai, is a coming-of-age novel set in Sri Lanka during the post-colonial period. The story unfolds against the backdrop of ethnic and political tensions, exploring the protagonist Arjie's journey to self-discovery amidst a complex and changing society. The narrative captures the clash of traditional values with the influences of the post-colonial era, shedding light on the impact of historical events and cultural shifts on individual lives. Through Arjie's experiences, the novel navigates the complexities of identity, sexuality, and the evolving socio-political landscape, offering a nuanced perspective on post-colonial memory in Sri Lanka. Bartlett proposed that when people recall memories, they tend to unconsciously fill in gaps and reshape details based on their own experiences, expectations, and cultural background. This process of reconstruction can lead to distortions and inaccuracies in memory.

The paper analyzes Shyam Selvadurai's portrayal of Sri Lanka in his novel "Funny Boy" (1994) and Monica Ali's depiction of Bangladesh in "Brick Lane" (2003) using Jasbir Jain's argument as a framework. The primary goal is to explore Ali and Selvadurai's evolving connections with their native countries, particularly Sri Lanka, and to critically examine how they navigate the themes of memory, history, trauma, and dislocation in their respective works. Monica Ali, a British writer born in Bangladesh, gained recognition for her novel "Brick Lane," which was a nominee for the 2003 Man Booker Prize. The novel chronicles the story of Nazneen Ahmed, a young woman who relocates to London at 18 years old upon marrying Chanu Ahmed. The pair is caught between their original Bangladeshi identities and their recently acquired British identity. Nazneen requires her husband's backing to accept her identity as a Bangladeshi lady residing in a diaspora, while Chanu upholds

Bangladesh's traditional belief in subjugating women under male dominance. The analysis seeks to unravel the complexities of the authors' relationships with their homeland, shedding light on the intricate interplay between personal and collective memory. Furthermore, the paper aims to problematize the use of memory by exploring how these authors engage with historical events and experiences, offering insights into the socio-political turmoil of their respective countries. In essence, the paper delves into the intricate layers of Selvadurai and Ali's narratives, aiming to provide a nuanced understanding of their representations and the ways in which they grapple with the multifaceted dimensions of diasporic identity and the impact of postcolonial dynamics on their storytelling.

Cathy Caruth, Bessel van der Kolk, and Judith Herman are influential figures in the field of trauma studies, each contributing significantly to our understanding of trauma and its effects on individuals. Let me provide a brief overview of their contributions: Caruth is known for her work on trauma and literature. She introduced the concept of "traumatic realism," emphasizing the fragmented and elusive nature of trauma narratives. Her book "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History" explores the challenges of representing traumatic experiences and the impact of trauma on storytelling.

Van der Kolk is a psychiatrist and researcher who has focused on the effects of trauma on the brain and the body. He emphasizes the importance of understanding trauma as a physiological and psychological phenomenon. His book "The Body Keeps the Score" explores the role of the body in trauma and how techniques like neurofeedback, yoga, and other somatic approaches can be used in trauma treatment. Herman's work has been pivotal in understanding the long-term effects of trauma, especially in the context of interpersonal violence and abuse. Herman's book "Trauma and Recovery" is a foundational text in trauma studies, outlining stages of recovery and the societal impact of trauma. These scholars have significantly shaped our understanding of trauma, influencing both academic and clinical perspectives. Their work has informed trauma theory, treatment approaches, and the broader discourse on how society responds to and supports individuals who have experienced trauma.

The study analyzes how the diasporic novel *Funny Boy*, authored by a Sri Lankan Tamil in exile, influences the current social divisions in Sri Lanka. The story chronicles the experiences of Arjun Chelvaratnam, a Tamil adolescent, as he deals with his growing same-sex attraction in a Sinhala-dominated Colombo. The paper examines how the family home and school, common middle-class spaces in Sri Lanka, control and standardize sexual preferences in a society that enforces anti-homosexual laws. The protagonist's sexual liberty is facilitated by the loss of these meanings.

The novel has a significant impact on current Sri Lankan politics by addressing the issues of devolution and federal solutions in response to previous civil disturbances, which have created territorial differences that assign specific locations based on race. The paper challenges the idea that intra-racial solidarity and geographical modeling are closely linked by examining the novel's fictional and sexualized landscapes of exclusion and resistance in Sri Lankan society. *Funny Boy*, Shyam Selvadurai's debut novel, was published in 1995 and takes place in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The novel depicts Arjun's development from childhood to adolescence as he faces challenges as a Tamil individual in Colombo during a period of tension.

Ali's novel "Brick Lane" delves into how social and historical context is overlooked in mainstream reactions to protests, reflecting the hidden power dynamics between the Bangladeshi community it portrays and broader British society. The work promotes a cultural perspective that enables it to be seen as an allegory of a woman's personal freedom from societal constraint. The novel's exploration of the patriarchy within the Bangladeshi community might be interpreted as an allegory depicting a woman's journey towards personal freedom from societal constraints. The Muslim woman's headscarf no longer symbolizes either Western female oppression or British Muslim resistance, but instead represents Nazneen's personal feelings of guilt and confusion as she is drawn to Karim, the middleman who delivers clothes for her to sew and will soon become her lover.

The novel's portrayal of the community within the social setting of female Bangladeshi textile workers in London's poorest district has significant ramifications for its exploration of gender. Naila Kabeer's research on Bangladeshi female garment workers in Dhaka and London, which influenced Ali's novel, emphasizes the potential for a faith- and community-driven movement to combat anti-terror laws and prevalent Islamophobia in Britain among young Muslim men. Faith-based community organizations in Tower Hamlets provide young men with a constructive option to extremism, using faith and communal support as means to reject violence and limitations.

Brick Lane depicts the male dominance in Muslim culture and how a mother and daughter come to realize they may create their own independent lives. The text highlights the roots of the present surge of young male Muslim terrorists who are angry and hopeless due to their diminishing power and the harsh truth that their medieval beliefs are incompatible with modern Western culture. Ali's *Brick Lane* is a novel that explores the protagonist's changeable cultural identity through Nazneen's contingent situations and discursive representations. Nazneen's identity creation is hindered by socio-political cultural difficulties that are drawn to her personality, preventing it from reaching completion. The narrative focuses on Nazneen's exploration and rejection of her ethnic identity, her lifestyle, and her battle for survival in England.

Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* delves into the characteristics of eastern and western culture by examining the unique cultural practices and individuals. Ali's character, Nazneen, embodies a profound understanding of modern reality and aspires for achievement in England. Cultural encounter and cultural identity theories are utilized to examine identity in connection with ethnicity, gender, role, cultural displacement, hybridity, cultural discrepancy, and conflict. Ali's first novel, *Brick Lane*, explores multiculturalism and delves into the issue of conflict and relationships between different cultures. Ali, a cultural critic, examines cultural concerns by vividly portraying characters within various socio-cultural contexts. Her protagonists are often alienated because to their inability to connect or converse with others, as they are not typical individuals. They are constrained by societal guidelines, standards, and principles that drive individuals to pursue a sense of identity and purpose in the current moment.

Nazneen, a Muslim lady, grapples with her personal identity in a foreign culture that enables her to thrive in society. *Brick Lane* is a narrative that delves into the lives of a Bangladeshi family residing in the UK, centering on the immigrant journey. The story follows Nazneen and her husband Chanu, who are relocated from a hamlet in Bangladesh to the Tower Hamlet Council estate through an arranged marriage. Ali's main character, Nazneen, was raised in Pakistan and experiences a significant change in her life at the age of seventeen. She swaps her Bangladeshi country residence for the Tower Hamlet Council estate, where she discovers the English aspiration and the difficulties of dealing with cultural disparities.

Brick Lane portrays Nazneen, a Bengali lady in London, through the perspectives of her husband Chanu and Hasina, both experiencing physical abuse, bigotry, loneliness, and severe financial challenges. The story highlights the vulnerability of these women, portraying Hasina's plight through her terrible English dialogue: "I am a low woman. I am nothing. I have nothing. I am all that I have. I can give you nothing." The novel emphasizes the exploitative conditions experienced by Bangladeshi women in the textile business in London and Dhaka. Kabeer's perspective indicates that women in Dhaka are gaining more personal autonomy, whereas Hasina is becoming more weak and socially marginalized. Ali's story appears to contradict this discovery by portraying Hasina as being more helpless and marginalized, while Nazneen experiences such significant empowerment that she is ultimately "surprised by her own ability to take action."

Brick Lane, a novel from 2003, explores the connection between the formal techniques of mimetic fiction and the historical backgrounds of multiculturalism and immigration via the story of Bangladeshi immigrants in London. The film initiates discussions on the immigrant experience and the conflicting situation faced by female migrants, who are perceived as outsiders by their host country and as objects of trade by their home community. The complexities of migration are highlighted through the characters, especially in Nazneen's interactions with her husband Chanu and her lover Karim. Nazneen's story emphasizes the significance of resisting one's destiny and the belief that everything must be endured, as nothing could be altered. The novel is a profound examination of the experiences of Bangladeshi women in London and beyond, emphasizing the obstacles they encounter in their pursuit of liberation and self-determination. Nazneen's identity is shaped by a dual narrative of education and presentation, as described by Homi K. Bhabha in relation to a nation's formation of its citizens. Her origins lie in a far past, and her life is governed by the story that defines her. She is the focal point of this discussion, central but completely separate from its expression.

Nazneen forges her identity by juxtaposing her personal narrative of her roots with the historical context in which she exists. Chanu, a first-generation immigrant, experiences issues and worries due to the conflict between the educational and performative aspects. He creates a mythical version of Bangladesh to make up for his lack of success in English society. Chanu asserts that Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore is the genuine progenitor of the nation and insists that his daughters master the recitation of Tagore's poem "Golden Bengal" to comprehend their heritage.

The conflict between Chanu and Mrs. Azad, the Westernized wife of Chanu's acquaintance Dr. Azad, highlights the struggle of feeling connected to a fictional homeland while residing in a foreign country seen as unfamiliar. Chanu describes the "immigrant tragedy" as the conflict between Western values and their own, the challenge of assimilation, and the importance of maintaining one's identity and heritage. Mrs. Azad dismisses Chanu's objections and emphasizes their deliberate decision to be in England. She compares the restricted lifestyle she must follow in Bangladesh to her life in London, where she enjoys the freedom to embrace either Western or Bangladeshi culture. The reader perceives the argument as a more precise portrayal of Nazneen's challenges compared to Chanu's.

Brick Lane is a novel that employs English as a common language for storytelling, enhancing the sense of realism. The novel depicts Nazneen's challenge with the English language, which results in an ironic emphasis on it. The narrator reflects on the incident from a perspective beyond the events, with a greater comprehension than Nazneen and presenting her ideas in English with a hint of contempt. The work addresses the conflicts within immigrant identity related to language and form, yet it appears that these conflicts have been resolved. The author contends that there is a rhetorical aspect present in form, which leads to an awareness of the challenges of translation and the limitations imposed by realism. Novels such as *Brick Lane* and *The Satanic Verses* illustrate postcolonial history, although they differ in their portrayals of hybridity.

A critique of *Brick Lane* by James Wood emphasizes the significance of reintroducing conventional societies into Western novels to restore the seriousness of nineteenth-century fiction, including elements such as marriage connections, religious burdens, civic duties, and societal decorum. This reverts the novel to its original purpose of acknowledging, opposing, and partially avoiding past oppressions. The use of import and trade jargon in this line highlights the drawbacks of this approach: it leads to underdevelopment, while the advantage is classic books. Misinterpreting postcolonial history is to view Bangladesh as a society characterized by “nineteenth-century gravity.” We should avoid equating postcolonial realism with the issues of a different era in Western history. Nazneen encounters taboos that are a result of the unique circumstances present in a culturally varied England.

Conclusion

Postcolonial culture is a complex blend of European cultural elements and indigenous traditions, aiming to establish a distinct local identity. Writers and intellectuals in formerly colonized nations started documenting their experiences to illuminate the realities of third-world countries. Postcolonial studies examine the evolution of migration concerns from addressing basic needs like hunger, conflict, famine, and diseases to encompassing cultural, political, economic, and educational factors. Immigrants congregated in public spaces to address cultural challenges and establish an immigrant diaspora. Diaspora refers to the dispersion of a population from their original homeland as a result of shared traumatic experiences in that homeland. These communities typically have challenges in preserving their culture while not being fully embraced by the majority of their new country, resulting in social isolation and alienation.

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