

Transplanted Gender Norms and Their Limits in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

In *Brick Lane* (2003), Monica Ali describes both the spatial and metaphysical geography of Bangladeshi immigrants living in the diaspora in Britain. Face-to-face with immigrant anxieties as well as material constraints in the host society, diasporic patriarchy seeks to transplant gender norms of its country of origin and imposes domestic seclusion on women under its control. Against such a cultural backdrop, Ali depicts the problem of identity and gendered expectations of women in the diaspora. There is a persistent concern over women's nomadic existence in patriarchal society and over their profound loss of confidence and cultural belonging. This specific, cultural pattern finds a concrete expression in Ali's description of the transplantation of Bangladeshi gender ideology in London, as the novel unravels its limits and inefficacy in the postcolonial world of information technology.

Keywords

Monica Ali, diasporic anxiety, transplanted gender norms, the Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain, permeable seclusion, diasporic patriarchy

Introduction

In her debut novel *Brick Lane* (2003), Monica Ali (1967-) represents the condition of Bangladeshis living in Bangladesh as well as in the diaspora in Britain, and touches on the transplantation of South Asian gender norms in the metropolis. The central narrative of *Brick Lane* unfolds over a period of seventeen years spanning from 1985, when Nazneen moves to Britain to join her husband Chanu, to 2002 when the latter performs a reverse migration back to Bangladesh. It

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chronicles the experience of its female protagonist, Nazneen, who grapples with cultural angst and the question of identity in a new world. Upon her arrival in London, Nazneen is conditioned to maintain Bangladeshi gender norms in the diaspora and is exposed to, and perplexed by, racial tensions and antagonisms between British Bangladeshis and white Britons in Tower Hamlets, London. Later in the novel, Nazneen develops an extramarital affair with the young activist Karim, engages in a sexual relationship with him and at the end frees herself from the restrictions of the domestic cocoon constructed for women in the Bangladeshi immigrant community and gains entry into public spheres.

The larger South Asian diasporic community in Britain mostly opt for the preservation of their home culture while negotiating with the strangeness and unfamiliarity of the host society and meeting its acculturation requirements. Diasporic men prefer marrying women from their country of origin, considering it as a way of importing and maintaining authentic *desbi* culture and identity in the host society. As the British-born character, Sara, in Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf* complains:

Why are all these men going 'back home' to marry? We want to marry men who have had a similar upbringing to us and share the new identity and perspectives that we've had to create to find our place.... The men don't seem to care, they just want to find a traditional wife and have an easy life. No wonder there are no decent men – they are all marrying 'back home' and we are all left with nothing. (Janmohamed 119)

In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen's transnational, intercontinental marriage with Chanu presumably gives the latter an assurance of transplanting and maintaining Bangladeshi cultural norms including gender roles in the diaspora. So the domestic condition Bangladeshi immigrant women inhabit is a patriarchal household that reflects the cultural mores of Bangladesh society and upholds its gender norms which are believed to be a prerequisite for maintaining cultural purity and traditions in the new social context.

A brand-new wife from back home like Nazneen, to put it in Liao's words, "embodies the authenticity (the real thing) of the homeland and its natural beauty and purity (unspoilt, from the village)" (119). Interestingly, the British-born young sweatshop middleman Karim's sexual advances to, and his longing to establish a permanent relationship with, Nazneen are also driven by a desire to reconnect with an authentic Bangladeshi culture and identity. As Liao states: "Both Karim's and Chanu's views of Nazneen as the embodiment of authentic Bangladeshi identity illustrate their desire for patriarchal identity and control" (120). This is because diasporic patriarchy seeks to re-institute sociocultural constraints for women under its control, as it wants them to manifest the signs

of an embedded “home” tradition and be essentially different from those of the host society.

Beyond the private space of their home, diasporic men are socially isolated, politically marginalised and culturally dislocated. They are inhibited from gaining equal access to many of the opportunities that are in theory supposed to be available to them. So the intimate domain of domesticity in the diaspora is perhaps the only place where they can have a complete sense of belonging and purpose as well as connectedness to the country from where they come. The domestic space gives them a feeling of independence and invulnerability and the power to control, especially their wives and other female members of the family. Women who inhabit this domestic space represent cultural identity as well as family values and traditions, and their adoption of host-culture norms and practices would be a threat to men’s authority in the domestic realm. As Chatterjee states:

Applying the inner/outer distinction to the matter of concrete day-to-day living separates the social space into *ghar* and *bāhir*, the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one’s inner spiritual self, one’s true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation. (120)

In the postcolonial era, when women from Bangladesh migrate to Britain, they are conditioned to follow an ideology of metaphorically repositioning the gender norm of private-public separation abroad. Because of the association of “the home and the female” (George 19) and the predisposition of metaphorising the domestic domain in feminine terms, the masculine translation of home culture in exile has a bearing upon the life and experience of women, as it is figured as oppressively confining for them. In gendering the diasporic space and making a semblance of the home culture of gender segregation in exile, women are conditioned to stay in domestic seclusion. As woman is predominantly considered “a stable signifier of ‘tradition’” (Gopinath 269), her strict adherence to the home tradition is maintained to ensure its permanence in the metropolis. Based on this observation, this paper will discuss Monica Ali’s portrayal of the transplantation of Bangladeshi gender norms in the diaspora and how it does not necessarily guarantee a de-facto adherence to those norms in the host country. The paper will primarily focus on the gendered experiences of diasporic man and woman, especially as reflected in Ali’s characterisation of Nazneen and Chanu.

Diasporic Anxiety and Gendered Experiences

As diasporic life causes social and economic marginalisation, it creates a deep sense of cultural identity that constantly haunts a migrant population. There is a persistent apprehension of domestic life being invaded by hegemonic metropolitan culture. A dilemma and a delicate balance between the fear of assimilation in the host society and a mood of cultural protectionism drive the exilic community to resort to the defensive measure of “constructing family-centred cocoons” (Malak 37). There is a looming apprehension of cultural dissolution among an immigrant people – for example, the contemporary Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain – who live in a multi-cultural environment, but are fixed in, to use Hall’s words, “some essentialized past” (236). Accordingly, in his sensitivity to homeland and to its cultural ethos, Chanu maintains a sense of repulsion to the larger host culture. In fact, such cultural sensitivity verging on phobia and moral panic is not peculiar to British Bangladeshis living in London, or to any other specific community for that matter; it is rather a characteristically common feature of a diasporic, ghettoised way of life. As Young puts it:

[T]he races and their intermixture circulate around an ambivalent axis of desire and aversion: a structure of attraction where people and cultures intermix and merge, transforming themselves as a result, and a structure of repulsion, where the different elements remain distinct and are set against each other dialogically. (19)

In the context of the South Asian diaspora in Britain, this cultural awareness is driven more by the political marginalisation one suffers in the host society than by a sense of ethnocentrism which was the case with colonial Europeans in the past. E.M. Forster describes such attitudes of European isolationism in *A Passage to India* (1924) and provides “a biting critique of the ethnocentrism of mainstream Anglo-Indian culture” in British India (Moore-Gilbert 9). In the novel, the English Club of Chandrapore is depicted as, in Meyers’ words, “the last fortress of white insularity” (24), marked by self-righteousness and a viciously condescending attitude to the native population.

As regards the formerly colonised, the migrants’ act of cultural restoration and tightly controlled imported practices are designed to protect their cultural values and to shield themselves from metropolitan cultural imperialism under the rubric of the new phenomenon of transnational migration. Bangladeshi migrants tend to formulate a unicultural community, a distinctive social and cultural enclave. This cultural reality of the Bangladeshi diaspora in London is illustrated by Ali’s choice of predominantly all-Muslim, Bangladeshi characters in *Brick Lane*. Except for the cursory mention of “Mr Dalloway” and “the tattoo lady” (Ali 52, 53) of London and a passing reference to “Brother Andrew” (Ali 220) in Dhaka, white/European or non-Muslim characters are conspicuously non-existent in the

novel. This marks a clear distinction between Ali's *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) that depicts a new multi-ethnic and multicultural London of "ethnic hotchpotch" (Haque 150). Ali offers exclusively an intimate view of the structures and experiences of the Bangladeshi immigrant community in the Tower Hamlets area of East London. She gives us a slice of London, whereas Smith depicts a wider spectrum of the city's cultural mosaic.

Ali's culture- and ethnicity-specific characterisation reflects an aspect of Bangladeshi diasporic life in London that echoes Ahmad's contention that "[t]here are entire constellations of London that have little do with white people on a day-to-day basis" (201). Communal parochialism in the diaspora does not foster integration into the culture of the host society, as it precludes any real exchange of communication with mainstream communities. However, based on Ali's fictional representation, characterising the entire Bangladeshi community in Britain as ghettoised and insular risks overgeneralisation and misrepresentation, because many of its members have successfully integrated within the host society while maintaining and preserving their religious and cultural values, as Janmohamed describes in *Love in a Headscarf* (2010). Moreover, to a great extent, this diasporic anxiety has a gender dimension which the discussion that follows will explain.

In their immigrant life in Britain, both Nazneen and Chanu are equally socially isolated. Nazneen's isolation is more physical, while Chanu's is more mental and psychological. Like earlier first-generation immigrants from South Asia, Chanu came to Britain for economic reasons and is ready to return home once he has earned enough: "I will be a success, come what may. That's promise number one. Number two, I will go back home. When I am a success. And I will honor these promises" (Ali 34-35). So the migrant-tourist Chanu is largely isolated from mainstream society in London and clings to "his traditional customs in terms of food, clothing, and entertainment" (Pataki). Even if the outside world is open for him to explore and to make use of, the constraints of diasporic life impede his access to the wider society of London. So he also does not necessarily belong to the world that Nazneen confined in domesticity longs to view. This is perhaps one reason why Chanu did not visit the attractions of London for a long period:

Thirty or so years after he arrived in London, Chanu decided that it was time to see the sights.... 'I've spent more than half of my life here,' said Chanu, 'but I hardly left these few streets.... All this time I have been struggling and struggling.' (Ali 289)

Moreover, when he moves out of his limited world of Tower Hamlets, he does so as "a tourist" (Ali 290), not as someone who belongs to the City of London. As is the case with Chen in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*, Chanu's long presence in

Britain is not “enough [for him] to feel comfortable in the new” (Mo 1) habitation outside his country of origin. Chanu's and Chen's tourist exploration of London indicates their desire to bask in a moment of happiness to ease, to some degree, the immigrant adversity.

However, Chanu struggles to make his place in mainstream society that brands him as an alien and outsider. Although he keeps on revising his expectations, he finds it difficult to realise his goal as a respectable member of society. So his exertion to fulfil an essential human need of gaining a sense of belonging in London and women's uphill battle for empowerment provide a remarkable point of similarity between the tensions and difficulties of diasporic life, resulting from men's changing social and economic status, and the abuse, oppression and subordination of women in patriarchy. Chanu has “a degree from Dhaka University in English Literature” (Ali 38), which suggests that he studied, arguably, one of the esteemed humanities at the most prestigious university in Bangladesh. But here in Britain, Chanu “who stepped off an aeroplane with a degree certificate” (Ali 38) struggles to raise himself to a position that would assert his sense of pride as well as difference from ordinary immigrants. A graduate of the University of Dhaka with English major, Chanu meets disenchantment and discontent over limited career opportunities available to him in Britain, especially because of “the racialized divisions and inequalities of London in the 1980s” (Procter 116). Eventually, the disillusioned and disenchanted Chanu's “downward mobility and growing frustration... in London result in a plan to return to Dhaka” (Beaumont 181). Finally, failing to persuade his wife Nazneen and his British-born daughters Shahana and Bibi to follow him, he migrates back to Bangladesh alone – apparently to regain his sense of cultural belonging and to re-establish his worth as a man in society.

Chanu has his own diasporic challenges which are manifestly different from those of Nazneen. His isolation, social withdrawal and ostracism, as well as lack of normal social relationships are not necessarily voluntary or deliberate, as he makes conscious efforts to overcome the mental barrier and to cope with mainstream society. An English literature graduate, Chanu reads Western literature as part of his attempts to adjust and adapt to a new cultural environment. He is also full of aversion and disgust towards a large section of British Bangladeshis and seeks to establish his distinctiveness thus:

Most of them have jumped ship. That's how they come. They have menial jobs on the ship, doing donkey work, or they stow away like little rats in the hold.'... 'And when they jump ship and scuttle over here, then in a sense they are home again. And you see, to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan. But these people are peasants. Uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition.'... 'I don't look down on them, but what can you do? If a man has only ever driven a rickshaw

and never in his life held a book in his hand, then what can you expect from him?’ (Ali 28)

He makes such condescending, disapproving remarks conceivably out of paranoia that he will be equated with “uneducated” Bangladeshis and that his exposure to Western education both in Bangladesh and Britain will remain unacknowledged. However, he “cannot get used to the metropolitan context and [hence] becomes torn between his dreams of achievements in England and the return to Bangladesh as an accomplished man” (Pleßke 442). He left a country beset by poverty and other difficult circumstances, and immigrated “to Britain which was seen as a land of opportunities” (Töngür 251). However, in Britain he undergoes a different set of problems and challenges – dissimilar from Nazneen’s gender-specific inhibitions and experiences – which thwart his social integration and professional enhancement.

In London, Nazneen faces the same patriarchy that has its stronghold in Bangladesh and is relegated to the sphere of domestic, private life of an immigrant ghetto. What is more, the author Monica Ali introduces the character of Hasina to provide flashbacks on women’s experiences back in Bangladesh as well as their to-and-fro movements between Britain and Bangladesh. As Hussain states:

The connection between Bangladesh and Britain is maintained through the transnational sisterhood between Nazneen and her rebellious sister Hasina. The representation of Bangladesh in the novel is then considered largely in terms of the migrant Nazneen’s memories of it and her sister Hasina’s negative experiences of continuing to live there, which we learn through the device of Ali presenting the reader with Hasina’s letters to her sister. (93)

Through Hasina’s episodic, excessively long letters written in pidgin, fractured and pauciloquent English, Ali brings the reader regularly back to Bangladesh and thus establishes a juxtaposition between the two locations. Importantly, through the subplot of Hasina, Ali gives the readers a vivid picture of economic exploitation of female labourers in garment factories in Bangladesh in the context of the capitalist economic structure constituted by the dominant world economic powers. This offers an opportunity to look at the condition of women in Bangladesh at a time when globalisation and the prospect of cheap labour predominantly bring women into the urban labour force beyond the domestic sphere of strict seclusion. Ali’s treatment of gender norms relates to the general backdrop of colonialism and postcolonial globalisation of a Western cultural framework that has continued “the dissemination of the standards of Western” industrialisation and the market economy even after the end of the manifest, “administrative structures of Western imperialism” (Dallmayr and Devy 15). Hasina’s long series of informative and effusive letters “dispel the idea that

Bangladesh is still rural, paradisaic; it is urban, violent and locked into the global capitalist system” (Sandhu 2003). In Bangladesh, women challenge traditional gender roles to avail greater employment possibilities and to engage in income-generating activities outside the domestic setting. Actually, the narrative of Hasina’s economic migration from her village to Dhaka and her subsequent sufferings are grounded in current affairs involving the postcolonial economic structure at work in Bangladesh.

By depicting a parallel picture of Bangladeshi women’s condition in both Bangladesh and Britain, Ali points to a noticeable difference in the intensity of entrenched patriarchal gender ideology that continues to constrain women’s access in public life in both societies. Whereas in Bangladesh, in the context of new economic possibilities created by the increasing growth of garment industries, women observe purdah norms in a less stringent manner, in the diasporic social structure of London, they are described as adhering to inflexible gender roles and relations. As Kabeer states:

In Bangladesh, a country where strong norms of purdah, or female seclusion, had always confined women to the precincts of the home and where female participation in public forms of employment had historically been low, the apparent ease with which women appeared to have abandoned old norms in response to new opportunities went against the grain of what has been presented in the development literature as one of the least negotiable patriarchies in the world. By contrast, in Britain ... Bangladeshi women were largely found working from home, in apparent conformity with purdah norms. (viii)

It is true that women in Bangladesh have to cope with powerful patriarchal cultural constraints, but because of economic vulnerability they go out to compete in the labour market, as evidenced by women’s significantly increased visibility in the country’s garment industry. Despite strict restrictions on their mobility, they “from the 1980s onwards have increasingly moved out of seclusion into wage employment within modern, large-scale, export-based garment factories” (Lewis, Rodgers and Woolcock 8) to work alongside men. In *Brick Lane*, “Hasina labors in Dhaka sweatshops and Nazneen does piece work in London” (Marx 430). While Hasina does her garment factory job in the public domain in Dhaka, Nazneen conducts almost the same kind of employment within the boundaries of domestic confinement in London. Nazneen does home-based work, as it is thought to be more amenable to domestic norms and purdah practices and helps her keep away from working men in public life.

Moreover, women’s decision to undertake home-based work in London is to provide an auxiliary source of income; hence, for Nazneen, undertaking economic activities is somewhat a voluntary choice. But for Hasina, it is imperative to have a proper job outside owing to her economic hardships and the

weak social safety net of Bangladesh. As Chakravorty states: “If Hasina’s journey is propelled by material lack that is hardly met, Nazneen’s is a spiritual, mental, material journey toward a freedom that is equally unconvincingly idealized” (178). Whereas for Nazneen, taking up industrial work outside the home would risk the transgression of gender rules sanctioned by an ideology highly valued among Bangladeshi immigrants, for Hasina such a venture invites the taunting asides of passers-by in Dhaka, as the social space is unfriendly to women in public life. Although the metropolitan society of London is supportive of women’s participation in outside employment, transplanted domestic ideology restricts their appearance in public.

Concurrently, in order to parallel these two larger cultural sites in microcosm, Ali fictionalises two contrasting social milieus in metropolitan London: one is the diasporic Bangladeshi community in Brick Lane and the other is the mainstream society of London. In Chanu’s and Nazneen’s diasporic life, there is a sharp dichotomy between inside and outside – the private and the public. The former is marked by the transported culture of male domination and the fear and anxiety about women’s transgression, and the latter is a landscape inhabited by both men and women and is not an all-male environment. When Nazneen comes out of her cocooned life to experience the outer world, she finds herself a complete stranger and observes that:

The people who looked in looked away again, neither slowly nor quickly, without interest or design. Razia always said, if you go out to shop, go to Sainsbury’s. English people don’t look at you twice. But if you go to our shops, the Bengali men will make things up about you. You know how they talk. Once you get talked about, then that’s it. Nothing you can do.² (Ali 59)

² This quote has a direct reference to what a Bangladeshi migrant woman interviewee in London says to Kabeer:

I don’t go into grocery shops in this area because they are all owned by men from our community. I feel embarrassed in those shops. If you go into them, the men look at you. If one of them says something, how can you protect your reputation? I prefer to go to Sainsbury’s, no one looks at you.

My husband does the shopping, not me. I don’t go for groceries, those shops are full of Bengali men, and though we are from the same country, our norm is not to go in front of men. I still feel the same. I don’t feel embarrassed in front of English people, they don’t look at you twice. But some people in our community spread gossip without reason. I know because I hear them talking about other people; if they can do that, they can talk about me as well. I don’t mind the saree shops, because there are more women there. (277)

In fact, Kabeer’s “study of Bangladeshi women garment workers in London and Dhaka” (Ali 493) entitled *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka* (2000) can be regarded as the genesis of Ali’s *Brick Lane*. Ali’s fictional portrayal of Bangladeshi women in London and Dhaka has been inspired, to a large extent, by the principal features of Kabeer’s factual representation. Even the protagonist Nazneen is a real character in

In Nazneen's *Tower Hamlets*, women are confined to the house, their public appearance often limited to their domestic roles, and their voyage out encounters voyeurism and the male gaze, and risks a great deal of social obloquy. Conversely, in the wider world of London, as depicted in *Brick Lane*, the public realm is a negotiated space shared between men and women. Nazneen's moving out of the Bangladeshi community in London gives her an experience of a conflict of consciousness. Her journey symbolises – both metaphorically and paradigmatically – a transformation from one social order to another.

Nazneen's predicament concerns her existence within the brick complex of apartments. Her domestic space epitomises the isolation and seclusion that Bangladeshi women immigrants experience in a transplanted culture of patriarchy. Upon her arrival in London, Nazneen is cloistered in a small flat and has to conform to the female gender norms of domestic seclusion. Conversely, Chanu's sense of inferiority in the diaspora is caused by his angst about his prestige and social recognition. Nazneen's problems of diasporic life are compounded by her "sense of bondage, lack of moving space in both [a] literal and metaphoric sense" (Haque 151), as her immigrant life is chiefly characterised by, in Lowe's words, "silences of obedience" (133).³ She is conditioned to live contentedly in the seclusion of her inner apartment in *Tower Hamlets*. In the private realm of domesticity, where Bangladeshi patriarchal culture prevails, women are conditioned to perform gender-specific duties and to adhere to strict notions of morality and propriety. Apparently, Nazneen does not show any desire to violate the custom or to challenge and break away from traditional expectations in order to explore the outside world until she interacts with Karim and comes under the influence of Razia. Eventually, she steps beyond the self-encapsulated and alienated Bangladeshi community of *Brick Lane*.

As mentioned earlier, the Bangladeshi diasporic community in London brings the South Asian gender norm of *purdah* into the metropolis where Bangladeshi women largely remain in the private domain. In the past, this *purdah* was impermeable, but in the globalised, virtual world of the twenty-first century women's confinement in the house is permeable. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen breaks away from the domestic norms and embraces the Western way of life and the leisure culture of London – at least psychologically and symbolically – while living in the private domain. This shows that the transplantation of gender norms of

Kabeer's book, and the original title of Ali's novel "Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers" reflects a chapter, "Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: Background to the London Study," in Kabeer's (109 and 193) work.

³ Unlike earlier works on Bangladeshis living in *Brick Lane*, such as Farrukh Dhondy's *East End at Your Feet* (1976) and *Come to Mecca* (1978), Syed Manzurul Islam's *The Mapmakers of Spitalfields* (1997) and Sanchita Islam's collection of Bangladeshi diasporic writings *From Briarwood to Barishal to Brick Lane* (2002), Ali's *Brick Lane* is most remarkable for its in-depth description of Bangladeshi women's condition in *Tower Hamlets*, as it has been depicted through the character of Nazneen.

back home has its limits, as secluded women can find access to public space by using modern technology, on which I will elaborate in the following discussion.

The Permeability of Domestic Confinement

In a world of information technology and virtual communications, the confinement of women in the interior world of the home and family is porous and penetrable. The television in Nazneen's flat is a window for her on the outside world – a world on whose threshold she is forced to wait, but is not accessible to her due to the practice of Bangladeshi gender ideology in the diaspora – and brings to her what goes on in the supposedly free society of London. The image on her television of a woman who “raised one leg and rested her boot... on the other thigh, making a triangular flag of her legs, and spun around until she would surely fall but didn't” – which Nazneen calls “Ice e-skating” (Ali 36) – builds a bridge between her world of domestic confinement and that of the popular, urban culture of London. Interestingly, Cormack provides hints for readers to become acquainted with the content of the TV programme Nazneen watches, stating:

To many brought up in Britain in the eighties, it is clear that Nazneen is watching Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean's gold-medal-winning ice dance based on Maurice Ravel's *Bolero*. Thus for a large portion of Ali's readership, the scene is not simply comprehensible but *familiar*, because it has already been widely disseminated. (709)

The TV shows give her an opportunity to stretch her imagination beyond the domestic domain and social isolation. This is why, at the end of the novel, when she finally goes ice-skating, “To get on the ice physically – it hardly seemed to matter. *In her mind she was already there*” (Ali 490; emphasis added). This becomes possible because modern communication technology invades Nazneen's domestic enclosure and makes a bridge between the monoculture of the Bangladeshi diaspora in London and the lifestyle of mainstream London society. This tells us about the limits and vulnerability of the patriarchal construction of the confining environment of the *zenana* in the postcolonial international order of migration and globalisation.

Interestingly, as television facilitates Nazneen's establishment of a link with the outside world, computer and Internet technologies narrow the gap between Chanu's diasporic life and his home country. He uses the Internet to familiarise his daughters with Bangladeshi cultural objects. Such use of information technology by a diasporic population is a common feature in the postcolonial world, as Gopinath maintains:

We are in an era of technosphere space, where dislocated geographical points merge and re-pollinate one another in virtual realms (such as online bulletin boards). As we move from paradigms of geosphere to infosphere, the boundaries of nation and diaspora begin to traverse, re-traverse, inform, and deform one another. (281)

Technological advances and the development of sophisticated computer-based communication decrease distances and reduce the emotional anguish of the loss of one's homeland. However, as they can mitigate the emotionally charged, homesick experience of exile, they are also likely to increase the anxiety of a sense of diasporic nostalgia. Middle-class immigrant communities use cyber-technology to connect with countries where they are from, and to alleviate their emotional distress. While Nazneen yearns to cross the patriarchal boundary of domestic confinement, Chanu longs to be back to his picturesque home country. As television for Nazneen is an instrument to connect her to the wider world, the computer and the Internet help Chanu to establish rapport with Bangladesh and with its common consciousness virtually. However, there remains a subtle distinction between Nazneen watching television and Chanu using computer and Internet technologies. Chanu's Internet is interactive and engaging, and it allows for personal communication and facilitates choices in content selection and consumption to some extent in ways that Nazneen's television does not. Nazneen's television is a one-way process of cause-and-effect, in which she is seen merely as a passive, powerless spectator. Moreover, she has less control over it than Chanu has over the Internet.

Remarkably, we notice a tradition-modernity dichotomy in Chanu's use of the modern device of the Internet while connecting himself with Bangladesh and in Nazneen's link to Hasina via letter writing which is an old form of communication. As in South Asian society women are predominantly associated with "tradition" and men with "modernity" (Roy 137), in the diaspora as well the former are conditioned to stay at home and to cling to the past in order for them to act as the keepers and preservers of tradition.

As the modern technological device of television metaphorically penetrates the supposedly impregnable wall of separation between the private and public in Nazneen's household, microcosmically the outside world invades it through Karim who is portrayed as "out and out an attractive western hero... [and] a modern western man" (Hasan, "Review" 670). This again suggests the limits and inefficacy of the domestic seclusion of women instituted by diasporic patriarchy. Karim's sexual incursion in Chanu's flat signifies two cultural ravages: firstly, it destroys the traditional domestic ideal of woman and female sexual purity; secondly, it stains the sanctity of the domestic realm itself. Nazneen's adoption of Western culture and her free pursuit of sexual gratification happen within the home enclosure – the locus of traditional values for Bangladeshi diasporic

families. Karim's sexual penetration of Nazneen does not occur outside the home, where the nature of cultural expectations is different owing to the excesses of modernity, and this bears both physical and metaphorical significances. His sexual infringement is also an invasion into the fortified realm of Chanu's world of sexual morality. It violates both the sanctity of Nazneen's purity and that of Chanu's household, as it also signals her refusal to adhere to conventions of the domestic sphere and virtues of the domestic-angel model of womanhood, even though she apparently seeks to affirm compliance and duty. Having discussed thus far the locus of confinement, in what follows I will touch upon the irresistible urge of Ali's heroine Nazneen to move out and explore the public sphere, which metaphorically signifies the mobility of domestic confinement.

The Static Chanu vs. the Dynamic Nazneen

In an age of hyphenated, multiple identities, men seem to have an assured claim on their definitive cultural identity, whereas women – denied a strong sense of cultural identity and distinctiveness, with which they could establish affinity and trust – are more prone to what Malak terms “cultural cross-pollination” (88). In *Brick Lane*, Ali is concerned, to use Fernea's words, “with identity, particularly women's identity, in a world where multiple choices, residences, and identities are becoming commonplace” (283). As men tend to tighten their grip on cultural roots, they are more concerned about the metaphysical problems of identity crisis and about the fear of losing religious and spiritual links to the behaviours and values of their culture of origin. They are generally averse to the adoption of the culture of residence and, in Lowe's words, to the “loss of the ‘original’ culture in exchange for the new [metropolitan] culture” (135). Men are generally predisposed to be irreconcilable to new cultural contexts and find it difficult to balance between the culture of their home country and that of residence. The departure of “narcissistic unicultures [and] monoidentities” (Malak 89) in the global village of multiculturalism poses for men a challenging task of securing a safe and stable sense of belonging and a permanent cultural identity as members of an essentialised community, while also accommodating their hybridised and evolving sensibilities. For men, in Ali's work, identity is *vertical* while it is *horizontal* for women. In other words, men are more inclined to what Said terms “filiation” and women to “affiliation;” identity for women is, as Weiss puts it, “rhizomic rather than rooted” (183) in a social ambience of polyethnicity and multiculturalism. This is in clear contrast to women's symbolic status in their country of origin where they are routinely forced to stand for community identity and for local cultural traditions (Roy 137).

A striking example of women's capacity for cultural accommodation is Bharati Mukherjee's eponymous heroine Jasmine in her novel *Jasmine* (1989). Jasmine's cultural metamorphosis begins with the change of nomenclature. Born

as Jyoti, she becomes Jasmine after her marriage with the progressive Prakash Viji: “[Prakash] wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasanpur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine.... Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities” (Mukherjee 77). Jasmine is a classic example of female cultural amenability in the context of multiple social encounters, as Jasmine says: “I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane. Half-Face for Kali” (Mukherjee 197). Like Mukherjee’s Jasmine, Nazneen shuttles “between identities” whereas Chanu tends to hold fast to the traditions and cultural mores he receives from ancestors and seeks to carry them down to his daughters in a different geographic location they inhabit; but Nazneen negotiates her identity and compromises her cultural roots with the social condition of her spatiotemporal surroundings.

This gendered sense of cultural belonging is exemplified by Ali through the distinctive characterisation of man and woman: woman’s predominant tendency to journey and to negotiate variant cultural patterns and traditions in multicultural contexts, and man’s virtually immobile existence at home and his chronic desire to go home when located outside it. Whereas Ali portrays Chanu as a flat and static character who is inclined to hold on to his original culture and disinclined to adapt to the host culture’s values, she depicts Nazneen as a dynamic woman whose arrival in London caused her to metamorphose from a tradition-bound, voiceless, submissive wife to an independent, decisive woman. Chanu betrays a strong feeling of nostalgia and anxiety to go back to Bangladesh and to take pleasure in Bangladesh society in order to assuage a sense of loss and uprootedness in the diaspora; but Nazneen is more accommodating and maintains a nomadic, peripatetic life of pursuing an endless journey.

A recurrent motif of “Going Home Syndrome” (Ali 32, 456) is also presented as a staple experience of man in the novel. Even though Chanu has a transnational identity and has lived in London for decades, his psychological affiliation with the country he is from remains very strong. He proudly and confidently declares that he and his family “are from Bangladesh” (Ali 296). Although he stays in London, Bangladesh is at the centre of his thought and imagination. The sheer purpose of his coming to London is to earn enough money to live a peaceful life in Dhaka. Chanu insists, “When the English went to our country, they... went to make money, and the money they made, they took it out of the country. They never left home.... And that is what I am doing now” (Ali 214). It is true that London is not home for either Chanu or Nazneen, as both have diasporic anxieties about space and belonging and both are concerned about racist violence since immigrants are primary targets of xenophobic attacks. But we do not notice an equal yearning in Nazneen to go back to Bangladesh. For Chanu, Bangladesh provides a better sense of cultural identity and national belonging. It is a place where he is a natural success, as he says: “Here I am only

a small man, but there... I could be big. Big Man” (Ali 132). In London, Chanu experiences the brunt of an immigrant life rife with racial tensions in the post-9/11 era, and faces the menace of losing his children to a different cultural environment (Ali 111). But Nazneen does not seem to experience such cultural, identitarian anxieties, as for her Bangladesh poses a different set of difficulties such as spatial segregation and gender-based discrimination.

In the contemporary world of mass migration and global interactions, “one man’s imagined community is another man’s political prison” (Appadurai 30). These contrasting experiences of host and migrant communities can be pertinent to the cases of Chanu and Nazneen. In Bangladesh, Chanu may enjoy relatively greater liberty because of his gender privileges; but for Nazneen, going back to Bangladesh and settling down there involves the risk of suffering from multiple types of disadvantages and gender disparities. However, in this respect, one should keep in mind an important caveat that patriarchy is not the only source of oppression for women, so looking at women’s difficulties in Bangladesh society exclusively through the prism of gender may not be the most appropriate view. As I mentioned in an earlier work:

In any attempt to address gender inequity and other forms of discrimination in a country like Bangladesh, it is absolutely essential to understand Bangladesh society and its various components, structures, values and institutions. It will be overly naive and far too simplistic to believe that women in Bangladesh suffer from multiple deprivations *only* because of patriarchal prejudices.... It will be equally incorrect to make broad generalizations about Bangladesh society and say that only women, not men, suffer extensive discrimination at different levels. (Hasan, “Introduction” 4)

When discussing gender issues of such a society, the question of class needs to be taken into account. Importantly, in *Brick Lane*, by attracting readers’ sympathy to Chanu’s constrained diasporic life in London, Ali strikes a significant balance between the gender gap of Chanu and Nazneen and the politics of exclusion and differentiation in the diaspora. Between Chanu and Nazneen, there exists “a strange relationship of simultaneous closeness and apartness” (Walter). As immigrants, they share the anguish of a diasporic life; but because of their distinct gendered experiences in the diaspora, they keep away from each other. Although Nazneen seems to feel the thrill of life in London, for Chanu it has become increasingly rife with the flaring up of communal ill-feelings, as reflected in Ali’s portrayal of the racial rivalry between the two communal organisations, the Bengal Tigers of British citizens of Bangladeshi descent and the Lion Hearts of the white British. On the other hand, in his romantic vein, Chanu may characterise Bangladesh as paradisiacal and presume that it will accord him male privileges; but Nazneen has various consciousnesses and has to embrace diverse,

conflicting characteristics. Her perception of herself relies upon her relation to her surrounding space.

Conclusions

In *Brick Lane*, a cross section of the transplanted Bangladeshi community in London constructs a cultural space with a specifically Bangladeshi ethos. Its most conspicuous common feature is the protagonist Nazneen's physical and metaphorical confinement. The novel depicts a sociocultural mindset among Bangladeshi immigrants in Britain that prefers women to stay at home and be housewives and not seek opportunities to engage in public life, as there is fear of unknown dangers outside the safe walls of the domestic sphere, lest they get a bad reputation for the family. The novel also talks about Nazneen's feminist bildungsroman – her arrival at self-definition through her journey from Bangladeshi patriarchy to its transplanted form in the diaspora and her eventual defiance of its domestic gender norms. In other words, Nazneen migrates from Bangladesh to join her husband Chanu in London where she realises a transition from naivety to sophistication and to the gradual removal of cultural limitations.

Face-to-face with “the pains and possibilities of migration” (Dwyer 495), in the end Nazneen “frees herself from the closed world of a traditional Bangladeshi housewife” (Eade 32). Born in a remote rural area in Bangladesh in 1967 (the year the author Monica Ali was also born), she has an arranged marriage at the age of eighteen and is transported to London to join her much older husband Chanu who is a forty-year-old, first-generation immigrant from the same country and arrived in Britain sixteen years earlier than her. In diasporic life both Chanu and Nazneen face constraints the nature and enormity of which is somewhat determined by their gender.

One way for Chanu to assuage his diasporic anxiety is to marry a woman from rural Bangladesh who will guard the domestic environment against metropolitan cultural imperialism. Thus women's domestic roles constitute a predominant theme in *Brick Lane*, as the concept of “home” and national belonging, the issue of domesticity and the impact of zenana as the archetypal space of confinement on them are very pertinent in the novel. Upon her arrival in Britain, Nazneen was initially conditioned to live a life of seclusion and monotony in stifling domesticity and conformity to which her role as Chanu's “Other” has confined her. However, eventually, through homeworking, her brief romantic escapade with Karim and her decisive act of breaking out of domestic confinement into the mainstream social space of London, she embraces an alternative value system which was beyond her reach for a long time and which has finally rendered her social interactions and connectedness with the wider world in the public sphere possible. This suggests, as I have shown in this article, that transplanting the South Asian model of domestic seclusion in the diaspora is a futile patriarchal attempt to control women, especially in the contemporary

world of fast moving technological advancement and omnipresent social media access. Even if relegated to the domestic sphere, they will find ways to interact with the outside world. What is important is to give women equal opportunities to develop and make use of their potentials.

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