

Unchaste Desires: Gender- and Identity-Related Disquiet in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

This paper examines how patriarchal conduct in a Bangladeshi immigrant family living in London portrayed in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) has stimulated the unchaste desires of the main female character, Nazneen – a religious and culture-obedient wife and mother. When she needed to actualise herself as part of her journey to signify her identity, her husband played a dominant role in selecting a job perceived to be suitable for a housewife with limited knowledge about the world. As a devoted wife holding tightly to her religious and indigenous cultural values, she respected her husband's decision by accepting the sewing job he settled on which could be carried out without necessarily leaving the house. This choice of work, the decision taken by the paterfamilias, unexpectedly brought her to a most romantic sexual experience. I argue that the decision has resulted in new complexities. The job sparked an affair, which introduced her to both an imagined world of romanticism and a horrific world of unchastity. The complex feeling of disquiet and helplessness at becoming affectionately involved with a young man supposed to be her business partner consequently shook her identity as a woman, a wife, a mother, a believer, and, in a diasporic sphere, an immigrant who upheld Bangladeshi customs and traditions.

Keywords

Patriarchal conduct, diaspora, unchastity, gender, identity, self-actualisation

Introduction

Migration to a certain degree provides some enlightenment for migrants, especially women migrants, and helps liberate them from oppressive social practices brought from their home country. The transplanted practices are regarded by women migrants as traditions that should be embraced and preserved. These values intersect with western practices they experience in the host country. It seems such things as Western practices in the host country facilitate women migrants to gain some self-awareness about alternative ways of

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life. The alternative way which places value more on the personal rather than social realm foregrounds an appreciation of individual freedom over family bonds, marriage customs and spirituality. Consequently, this alternative way of life is felt to be more promising for those women migrants, providing the agency allowing them to strive to liberate themselves from oppressive practices.

In the western world, appreciation of individual freedom is voiced by liberal movements or Liberalism. Liberalism is defined as an idea that is “operated with a belief in the freedom and welfare of the individual and often related to capitalism” (Ritzer 190). The definition leads to an understanding that liberalism is the same as individualism. Since liberalism is related to individualism and capitalism, it is often associated with western culture. On the other hand, traditionalism is related to “traditional conceptions of community,” which tend to emphasise “primordial attachment to the family, and to ties of kinship and place, as the bedrock of social solidarity” (Day 16). These conceptions indicate that traditionalism deals with “the virtues of small town and village life, the solidarity of various ethnic communities and the warm relationship to be found among those who share common interests and goals” (Day 16). Traditionalism can, accordingly, be related to social harmony, tolerance, collectivity, solidarity, and warmth that are often associated with eastern culture.

The intersections of the immigrants in valuing traditionalism and facing the unavoidable liberalism have influenced their thoughts on the value of the family bond. These conflicting views are depicted in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), a notable British contemporary novel. The novel gained prominence right after its publication, as it was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2003. The silver screen version of the novel was released five years later and marked its own success. The novel is mainly about “cultural differences and addresses gender relations within the Bangladeshi community” (Weedon 26). Despite the controversy it raised and charges by critics that it is “*not* a realistic portrayal of the Bangladeshi community around Brick Lane” (Friedman 104), the novel is still considered one of the best literary pieces produced in the new millennial era depicting the close-to-reality ups and downs of a Bangladeshi immigrant family. It depicts the encounters of the main characters with liberalism while at the same time they still view the importance of tradition, especially with regard to family values and marriage. The novel pivots on the contradictory views resulting from the intersection between liberalism and traditionalism offered by migration, which is highlighted in the portrayal of the main female character who is “constantly struggling against patriarchal constraints” (Pereira-Ares, *Hijab* 204) in order to be independent.

Family is traditionally seen as “either a natural and eternal formation or as an institution the structure and change of which can be directly derived from the structure of society and its change” (Held 126). Family is now seen “as one of the

most important entities in identity formation” that serves as “the mediator between the economic structure of the order and its ideological superstructure” (Held 126). Family is considered a place where identity is shaped and, accordingly, holds its importance in the process of one’s personality maturing.

The life-fluctuation experienced by immigrants in encountering the new values of life is discussed from the angle of the main female character of the novel, Nazneen. She naturally holds her multiple positions: a woman, a mother, a wife, a religious believer and an immigrant. These positions become the points of departure of her struggle to signify her self-identity. She values what her root culture and religion have taught her about how to conduct herself as a woman, although the cultural and religious values position her under the domination of males. The different values she experiences after living in Tower Hamlets, London, have exposed her to another perspective of life, and consequently made her own life more complicated.

One of the reasons why Nazneen faces a more complicated life is actually the involvement of her family, especially her father, in deciding what she is supposed to do. Nazneen’s family holds its role as more than “a major transmission belt for the diffusion of cultural standards to the oncoming generation” (Merton 158), as the parents want to “transmit the portion of culture accessible to the social stratum and, therefore, [parents] decide what is the best for the children” (Merton 159). Nazneen’s father has accordingly practiced his “parental ambition” (Merton 214) and therefore forces Nazneen to comply with his decision for her to get married to Chanu Ahmed, a man perceived to be educated. By welcoming an educated man in the family, Nazneen’s parents hope that their social status² will be raised. By agreeing to get married to a man of her father’s choice, Nazneen encounters the domination of the patriarchal system in the South Asian family over the life of an individual woman.

Monica Ali might have a “skin-deep understanding of arranged marriage” due to her “four-year early childhood stay in Bangladesh” (Hasan 670, 669). Yet, her presentation of arranged marriage becomes a prelude to male dominance in Nazneen’s life, which later contributes to her identity consolidation. Despite Ali’s contention over arranged marriage, she acknowledges it as a powerful drive in the mind of a woman who marries to improve her life.

As, after marriage, Nazneen has to comply with what her husband tells her to do, she moves to London, accompanying him in the hope of getting a better life. Her migration to London is actually the beginning of another experience of getting more deeply involved in patriarchal culture. As a Bangladeshi woman, she is, of course, religious and culture-obedient. She has been very dependent on her husband, especially as he owns all the economic resources which “become the

² According to Ritzer, social status refers to “a structural position within a social system” (241). As part of society, Nazneen’s family sees it as important to have high social status.

instrument for sustaining the existing patterns of relations and authority” (Held 133). She trusts her husband and is sure that her life under his protection will always be happy and tranquil.

Regardless of how obedient Nazneen is to her husband, she keeps in mind a critical question on the patriarchal system that subordinates women to men. Nazneen cannot live solely as a wife as she is also part of the wider society. As part of society, she holds a position as an immigrant who has to face some new realities. Like other South Asian migrants, she holds her cultural values and religious beliefs very firmly. Yet, she has to get involved with a society which is secular and individualist. At some points, she views this polarity as the grounds of her cultural upheaval and, at some points, the feeling of being “unhomely.”³

Nazneen’s compliance with the arranged marriage organised by her parents, particularly her father, and her obedience to her husband from the first day of marriage, signify the patriarchal power she experiences prior to moving to London. Living in a foreign country, she is often involved in questioning herself about what she really wants. The cultural lack has even brought her to a more complicated life. The reality she faces forces her to become a fighter while remaining an obedient housewife, a mother and a Muslim woman. The fight to substantiate her own new identity has brought her to a new chapter of life which she has never imagined before.

Male Domination vs. Female Struggle to be Independent

Patriarchy is traditionally considered a practice where males hold domination over females in every aspect of life. To be specific, it is defined as “a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women” (Hartmann 14). This definition shows how men may collaborate among themselves to sustain dominance over women sexually and economically by relying on the social system which benefits them. By having control over these two sectors, men “control women’s labour power, both for the purpose of serving men in many personal and sexual ways and for the purpose of rearing children” (Hartmann 15). It limits the role of women to cooking, cleaning and raising children.

The patriarchal system further causes segregation between men and women. The segregation has positioned women as “the atavistic and authentic body of [the] national tradition (inert, backward-looking, and natural)” and men as “the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent, and historic)” (McClintock 359). It denotes that women are passive and static while men are more visionary and creative. Accordingly, women are viewed as submissive, as

³ Bhabha’s term “unhomeliness” (9) encapsulates the alienating feeling preceded by the confusion induced by the redefinition of “the home” and “the world.”

they have no urge to move forward. They are considered to be reluctant in making any decision. Thus decision making remains in the hands of men.

From the perspective of sexuality, women and their sexuality are placed in the sphere of “cultural tradition,” particularly when women are expected to be the “guardians of tradition” (Katrak 11). That tradition is however disguised by placing females in a sacred position. By positioning women as the “guardians of tradition,” society seems to put them in a higher position as they are responsible for keeping the tradition, something perceived to be important in certain societies. However, the meaning of “guardians of tradition” fundamentally positions women less advantageously than the term suggests. Women are actually “colonised within their very body” (Katrak 44). They are positioned to be the ones responsible for maintaining their traditional roles and domestic roles as daughters, wives and mothers. As daughters they have to comply with what the paterfamilias – the father – decides for them. As wives and mothers they have to abide by the orders set by other paterfamilias. It is the males that have authority over their sexualities. It is the males who decide with whom they have to spend the rest of their lives. It is the males who decide how many children they bear. In other words, the control over female sexualities – female bodies – is in the hands of males, the paterfamilias.

The father, in his position either as a husband or as a parent of children, is a symbol of male domination over women in society, particularly in a family. Father conventionally plays his role as the sole breadwinner in the family. As the only breadwinner, he deserves the highest place in the family strata, allowing him to be the only decision maker dealing with family affairs, and is considered to be “the one with the most experience with the ‘real world’” (Held 129). The position of women as housewives places them in the isolated area of the home while children are the members of the family with no decision-making power. Their vulnerability, in fact, strengthens the father’s position.

However, of late, there has been a change in the roles of family members. The roles, especially those of women, have shifted due to the emergence of liberalism and capitalism. Nowadays, women are no longer economically dependent on their husbands and have gradually been admitted into the “the economic world of the male” (Held 134).

The provision of access to economic resources, dominated by men, has become the turning point for women to gain more liberation from patriarchal oppression. To be liberated, they have to redefine their identities by embracing both roles as housewives and money-earners. This requires them to “work the job” and, at the same time, carry out their conventional duties as housewives. The job is seen as a “‘natural extension’ of their familial duty” (Mohanty 20). These roles might limit their employment opportunities.

The traditional point of view that a woman should be a housewife doing house chores is what is conceded by Nazneen as a Bangladeshi Muslim woman.

However, because she has been living in Britain for more than a decade, this point of view has gradually changed as she tries to help her family's economy by working as a seamstress. She has to face the reality of how difficult it is to survive in a foreign country. She has to work to earn a living. This new world has brought her to a new perspective of marriage, as she views her identity as a faithful and devoted wife differently. Here is the point where the redefinition of Nazneen's identity begins. She starts consolidating her identity by encapsulating her roles as a wife, a mother and a working woman.

Unchastity: A Contestation of Being Subordinated and the Pleasure of Intimacy

After the third year of her marriage, Nazneen begins to re-think what she feels towards her husband especially during the bad time they have to go through together when their son has to be hospitalised. She starts to think of the quality of the man her father had chosen for her. The marriage arranged by Nazneen's father is a representation of the fact that the father's position as a decision maker is strong in a traditional family. As she starts thinking of the arranged marriage, she begins to reflect on the feeling she has for him. Even though she cannot decide what kind of feeling she has inside her heart, whether it is love or just understanding, she still does her best to be a devoted housewife and mother to her son. For three years, she has often thought that she has been living with someone who is not physically attractive and who always needs to be heard every time he talks, much of which is about him and his experience. Her feelings towards her husband thus continue to oscillate:

She could love him. Perhaps she did already. She thought she did. And if she didn't soon would because now she understood what he was, and why....

Her irritation with her husband, instead of growing steadily as it had for three years, began to subside. (121)

Despite her changed feeling from being irritated to becoming more pacified, and after having spent some time together with her husband, Nazneen still cannot determine if she really loves her husband as a man. What she feels is little more than just understanding. Listening to him is just her obligation as a wife, as a dutiful woman complying with her domestic responsibility. Her irritation signifies her feeling of being subordinated in the family.

The feeling of being subordinated because of her position as a wife does not hinder her from always paying respect to her husband, despite Chanu's difficulties in playing his role as the real family breadwinner. As an immigrant, it is not easy for Chanu to get a job:

There had been a period, weeks or perhaps months, but to Nazneen it seemed an infinity.... He started every job with a freshly spruced suit and a growing collection of pens. His face shone with a hope. And then greyed with frustration, with resentment. (203)

He always wants to find a job he thinks proper for him. It causes him constantly to change jobs over time. All Nazneen does is support him without having the nerve to ask him whether she is allowed to help. Because of his difficulties, there is a period of time when Chanu, the head of the family, just stays at home without a job, which means there is no income for the family.

After living in London for sixteen years, Nazneen is no longer a village girl that takes her fate for granted. She realises that her family needs money. At the same time, she also realises that it is not easy for her to obtain her husband's permission to work, even at home, because of her position as a wife. There is a belief among traditional Bangladeshis that when a married woman works, it means that the husband is unable to feed her. Accordingly, she does not want her husband to be offended and tries to tell him that she is willing to work at home without abandoning her role as a mother and a wife. Additionally, as a man, Chanu holds a higher position in the family hierarchy and, therefore, has "the power to decide [on] women's (non-)involvement in matters of the public sphere" (Rascanu 30). Nazneen's proposal to work means her involvement with the public sphere.

'Some of the women are doing sewing at home,' said Nazneen. 'Razia can get work for me.'

....

For a while he ruminated and explored the folds of his stomach. 'Some of these uneducated ones, they say that if the wife is working it is only because her husband cannot feed them. Lucky for you, I am an educated man.' She waited for more, but he fell into a dead reverie and said nothing further. (184)

Chanu eventually reconsiders Nazneen's proposal after once turning it down. He thinks that his wife can help him earn some money for their living without necessarily leaving the house and putting aside the house chores she is obliged to do. By borrowing some money from a usurer, Mrs. Islam, he finally buys her a sewing machine. As the head of the family, he decides sewing to be the most suitable job for his wife:

They put the computer on the dining table and the sewing machine next to it. Thread was found and pieces of cloth. Nazneen broke one needle. Chanu fitted another and she sewed a dish towel to a cloth that she used to wipe the floor. 'It is lucky for your mother,' Chanu told the girls, 'that I am an educated man.' (192)

Nazneen works on the unfinished clothes sent from the factory where Razia is working. Therefore, she needs to learn various techniques of sewing:

Two weeks was enough to learn all the features. She mastered basting stitch, hemming, button-holing and gathering. Razia came to supervise and set homework. Nazneen put in zips, flew through seems. (194)

This is a moment when there is a shift in Nazneen's role as wife and mother. As she helps her husband to earn some money for the family, she starts entering the world of economy, which is traditionally ruled by men.

The moment Nazneen starts her sewing job – a job chosen, fully supported and approved by her husband – is the moment Nazneen starts to be an independent woman. Working at home with her husband's approval allows her to see affairs happening in the real world – affairs such as the enjoyment her neighbour has in having boyfriends and multiple sexual relationships are completely new to her. The intimacy they have is something that she has never known before. For her, it is simply a relation between a man and a woman who are not bound by marriage. As a Muslim, she views it as adultery.⁴ For her, the only man who reserves the right to touch her is Chanu. However, she has never experienced the intimacy felt by the woman when she is with him because the sexual relationship she has with him is merely her duty as a wife. Her body is in the hands of the man to whom she is married. She has never had a chance to feel the intimacy the other women feel when they are with their lovers.

Nazneen's new world of work has become a gate for Karim to come into her life. He is a middleman who brings some unfinished clothes from the factory to her house. He is also the man who changes her life and stance toward the meaning of "love" and "intimacy," so that this devoted, traditional wife leaves the house without telling her husband. He is the first man who has made her feel restless:

Of course she would not go. It was out of the question. She did not mention it to Chanu because there was no question of her going. There was no point in raising it....

She was tired today but she was restless. The fridge was stacked with Tupperware and there was no real excuse to cook. She washed a few socks in the kitchen sink. And then she went out. (236)

Karim is also the first man who makes her feel something strange inside her body that she has never experienced before when she is close to her husband:

⁴ According to Foucault, adultery is "breaking the rules of marriage or seeking strange pleasures that brought an equal measure of condemnation" (*Knowledge* 38).

He picked up a handful of brass buttons from the cardboard box. He put them in the front pocket of his jeans. He tipped out the remaining buttons onto his palm and pocketed those as well. Nazneen felt an electric current run from her nipples to her big toes. She sat very still. (261)

Nazneen feels something she cannot run from – something that makes her feel calm and thrilled at the same time. The relationship with Karim brings her to an “exchange of intimacy” and “reawakened passion” (Kipnis 293). She, however, does not know what kind of feeling she has inside her heart, whether it is love or lust:

He kissed her on the mouth and he led her into the bedroom. Get undressed, he said, and get into bed. He left the room. She got changed into her nightdress and lay beneath the sheets.... What she wanted to do was sleep. It would be impossible to stay awake. She was sick and she needed to sleep.... She turned her face into the pillow and moaned and when he kissed the back of her neck she moaned again. (288)

It is the beginning of the love affair, something that has made Nazneen feel what she has never felt before as a woman. The physical contact she makes with Karim is the moment that makes her feel special. She has never noticed her own body before and her affair with Karim makes her realise that she is an interesting woman. On top of that, she really feels she is a real woman:

She was aware of her body, as though just now she had come to inhabit it for the first time and it was both strange and wonderful to have this new and physical expression. (343)

The love affair makes Nazneen feel delight and, at the same time, dread. It has put Nazneen at the intersection of being a devoted housewife or retaining the pleasure she feels. As a Bangladeshi woman, her cultural roots have put her in the position of a dutiful wife and mother. Yet, as an immigrant woman, she notices the reality that women can be as free as men in determining their life choices. As a woman, she is introduced to the world of intimacy. Yet, as a religious believer, she considers herself a sinner. She is “interrogating not only the dominance of patriarchy but also the hegemonic ‘interpellation’ of the culture of belonging” (Kuo 172). She is questioning her position as a woman in the philosophical tradition she uprightly holds and at the same time digesting the values offered by her new dwelling place. The bizarre condition of getting involved in an unchaste desire thus requires her to negotiate her “role identity” as a woman – as a human being.

The Impact of the Unchaste Desire on Nazneen's Identity

Nazneen's interaction with Karim brings her to a personal crisis as a faithful Muslim woman. As she has a love affair with the younger man, she is trapped in her belief, in the rule of God written in the Qur'an, and her intimacy with Karim. Together they read the Hadith on adultery. They understand its meaning, but still they continue to have an intimate relationship. It seems that they try to ignore the meaning of the Hadith:

'Hadith of the day, on an Islamic web site.'

'Go on – what does it say?'

He reads in English. *'On the authority of Abu Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him) who reported that Allah's Messenger (may the peace and blessing of Allah be upon him) had said: A man's share of adultery is destined by Allah. He will never escape such destiny. The adultery of the eye is the look, the adultery of the ears is listening to voluptuous talk, the adultery of the tongue is licentious speech, the adultery of the hand is beating others harshly, and the adultery of the feet is to walk to the place where he intends to commit sins. The heart yearns and desires for such vicious deeds. The loins may or may not put such vicious deeds into effect.'*

After the first few lines Nazneen heard only the blood in her ears. She watched Karim as a mouse watches a cat; when he turned she would be ready. (emphasis in original; 347)

Nazneen, in particular, tries to look for a justification of her love affair by refusing to hear the whole content of the Hadith. Deep inside her heart, as a Muslim woman, she is conscious that she is wrong. She feels her ears to be numbed as she realises what is inside the Hadith is about adultery.

Nazneen feels guilty but it is hard for her to stop seeing Karim. She is consumed by inner turmoil, debating the pleasure she feels and the crime she commits:

In between the sheets, in between his arms, she took her pleasure desperately, as if the executioner waited behind the door. Beyond death was the eternal fire of hell and from every touch of flesh on flesh she wrought the strength to endure it. (299)

Her heart is full of conflict knowing that what they do is a great sin and that the right punishment she has to bear is death or some other punishment such as to be banned from appearing "in public religious ceremon[ies]" (Foucault, *Pleasure* 145). Yet, she feels a great pleasure that has never been felt before. It is in accordance with what Foucault proposes, that adultery brings "strange pleasures" but at the same time "an equal measure of condemnation" (*Knowledge* 38). As a Muslim, she feels uneasy as she believes in the existence of hell and an executioner who always follows her and will execute her when she commits a sin.

Although, on one hand, she enjoys the relationship involving her unchaste desires, Nazneen feels terrible and uneasy. It has shaken her identity as a Bangladeshi and a Muslim woman who is supposed to put her family as a priority. As a culture-obedient woman, she has been of the opinion that married women “were bound by their juridical and social status as wives; all their sexual activity had to be within the conjugal relationship and their husband had to be their exclusive partner” (Foucault, *Pleasure* 145).

Sometimes she fell into a state of bottomless anxiety....

But much of the time she felt good. She spent more time talking to her daughters, and they surprised her with their intelligence, their wit and their artless sensitivity. She served her husband and she found that he was a caring husband, a man of integrity, educated and equipped with a pleasing thirst for knowledge. (300-01)

She realises that what she is doing is inappropriate. She understands herself that she has been “divided between her loyalty to Chanu, her commitment to her children and her love for Karim” (Chattopadhyay and Shrivastava 118). She is supposed to be loyal to only one man, but she is not. She compensates with what she does for her family. As a religious woman, she is afraid of the consequences of the sinful deeds she has committed.

The unchaste desire Nazneen feels takes her to her identity negotiation as a woman. She has to untangle her inner conflicts one by one. She has to first unravel her relationship and emotional involvement with Karim. Next, she has to decide what is best for the future of her family. She finally decides to break away from Karim because of several reasons. Her independence and her love for her children become her major reasons to end their affectionate relationship:

‘It would be too difficult,’ said Nazneen, ‘for us to be together. So I think we had better stop now.’

Karim began to say ‘right’ again, but caught himself. ‘Yes, I see what you mean. With the children and everything.’

‘I have to think of them first.’

‘Exactly,’ said Karim. He sighed.

Nazneen began to understand: how much she had lightened his load. (451-52)

As a mother, she believes that she has to accommodate her children’s concerns above her own. But, as a wife who is supposed to be by her husband’s side, following him everywhere he goes, she refuses to follow Chanu and go back to Dhaka. Here she tries to reject male domination over her. She tries to let go both men who have occupied her body for years.

The choice of staying in London is a turning point for Nazneen in determining her identity. Nazneen, at this point, tries to build her own image. When she decides not to follow her husband to Dhaka and stays back in London, “Nazneen does not lose her identity in multicultural London but rather discovers it” (Perfect 119). Her negotiating processes in making a decision are related to her increased reflexivity, which means she is “free to choose not only what [she] want(s) to do, but also what [she] want(s) to be” (Calhoun et al. 222):

Nazneen moved her head to the song. Her hips went side to side. She tapped her right foot, then the other. She raised her arms and moved her chest. The music broke in waves over her entire body.

....

Shout! She sang along... She swooped down and tucked her sari up into the band of her underskirt. *Shout!* (emphasis in original; 489)

The dance she dances symbolises her position as a free woman. Her expression shows her true feeling. She is free to express her ideas through her dance movements. Her body has been in the hands of male domination for a considerably long time. It is currently and totally hers and that has made her who she really is: an independent woman.

Brick Lane presents the notion of South Asian feminism in the portrayal of Nazneen’s character development. The novel constructs “a parallelism between the emancipation of Nazneen’s voice at the formal level and her process of self-empowerment” (Pereira-Ares, *Gaze* 73), both of which are deemed as central issues of feminism in the region. South Asian feminism has developed because of the “contemporary interventions” (Loomba and Lukose 1) in forms of migration and globalisation. The interventions have prompted the shifting viewpoints in addressing women’s roles in their domestic and social lives.

Moreover, South Asian feminism incorporates both “the insights of postcolonial theory” and “cultural and historical discourses that regulate and construct gender” (Kapur 346-47). Postcolonial theory provides an adequate framework to delineate women’s positions socially, politically, historically and culturally in attaining “formal equity” and “a deep faith in the emancipatory potential” (Kapur 336), and solving “problems caused by cultural and economic strains” (Karim and Nasir 125). The delineation of women’s position may lead to their determination in claiming their identities. At this point, the concept of Western feminism might influence the shift in viewing women’s roles. The influence is embodied in the self-awareness developing among South Asian Women that is manifested through Nazneen. Western secular life gives Nazneen a way to exercise self-determination over her own body as shown by her rejection of male dominance over her body and mind in the name of social norms, in her case by Chanu, and in the name of individual desire, in the case of Karim.

Such a thing as self-determination is also portrayed in another literary work written by an England-born American writer of South Asian descent, Jhumpa Lahiri, entitled *The Namesake*, in which Moushumi's⁵ freedom is symbolised in the act of dismissal of two men at the same time: her cheated husband and her lover. South Asian self-determination is modelled through the rejection of bodily occupation of men over women in the name of social norms which are disguised as social discourses. Thus, such self-determination as in Western feminism provides more space for women to negotiate and manipulate themselves through individual discourses in a way to counter-balance male domination.

Conclusion

As a Bangladeshi Muslim woman, Nazneen has done what she has to do as a wife, a mother, a culture-obedient woman and a religious believer. She always complies with the decisions taken by her husband including the one made for her to help him earn money for the family. As she interacts with the world, other people and her inner self start to redefine the meaning of becoming a real woman. Shaken by the complexities between her relationship with Karim and her family, she starts to reconstruct her identity, from a naïve Nazneen into an intimate woman in need of passionate touches of a real man and at the end into an independent and freethinking woman.

Nazneen gains her life momentum when her husband permits her to work. The affair she has transforms her into a new woman who realises her own individual rights to decide what is best for herself. The male patriarchal hegemony that had once entrapped her life eventually becomes the power that sets her free to become the woman who is in full control of her own self.

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⁵ Moushumi is a female character in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2004). She is an American-born Indian immigrant who is constantly in pursuit of her identity through the relationships she has with various men. Her main intention is, however, to claim her identity as a female immigrant who holds a full right over her own body.

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