

Bangladeshi Women and the Concept of Agency in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*: Patriarchy, Love and "Sisterhood"

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Abstract

Although mainly set in London, an important part of the action in Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2003) focuses on the protagonist's sister Hasina and on the latter's life realities back in Bangladesh. This paper explores Bangladeshi women and their attempt at gaining agency in a society portrayed as still highly patriarchal, in which women are forced to accept and perpetuate a principle based on fate rather than on personal choice. Ali's view of Bangladeshi society is therefore tough, portraying men as dominant, oppressive and unreliable. At the same time, women who want to make their own decisions in life by "kicking against [their] fate" have to face discrimination and social repudiation both by men and women of their society/communities. This paper analyses these women's struggle to gain agency while applying a variety of approaches to agency, in connection with the concepts of patriarchy, love and "sisterhood." The transgression of boundaries by the protagonist, disapproved of by society, may be interpreted as an attempt at performing agency. However, this still has to be investigated within the context of patriarchal oppression and Muslim communities. The analysis illustrates that women's agency is constantly obstructed by patriarchy because man still occupies the position of the legitimate, authoritarian figure that does not allow women to progress. "Sisterhood" may be seen as women's agency and as a potential solution that challenges patriarchy. Love can be understood as existing within the framework of marriage or heterosexual relationships.

Keywords

Agency, patriarchy, love, "sisterhood," action, choice

Introduction

The central theme of this paper is agency with respect to Bangladeshi women as re-presented by British Asian writer Monica Ali in her best known and most appreciated novel, *Brick Lane* (2003). Among the favourite issues theorised by

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feminists in general, and by “Third World”² feminists in particular, agency in connection to women of the “Third World” is approached in this paper as the centre of a wider analysis that includes other analytical categories – patriarchy (linked to the idea of community or society), heterosexual love (as marriage or other kinds of heterosexual relationships) and “sisterhood” (understood as female bonding rather than as the feminist term “global sisterhood”). The analysis will show that love and patriarchy may form a common front line against both women’s agency and “sisterhood.” The writer focuses a lot on Bangladesh (mostly Dhaka) as setting for part of the novel, a part that has been frequently ignored or not sufficiently approached by her critics.

The debate concerning agency as it is viewed by First World feminists and by “Third World” ones is often linked to the idea that “sisterhood is global,” introduced by the former and challenged by the latter. “Third World” feminists insist that First World ones are wrong in their belief that there is one common oppression of women (patriarchy), ignoring or simply dismissing other types of oppression that exist against women and among them. Feminists such as Chandra T. Mohanty (1991) or A. Ong (1988), not only refuse the *a priori*, implicit victimisation (presumably existent within her ethnicity or race) of the “Third World” woman by the white Western feminists but also reject the non-Western “Other” construct that incorporates *all* women who live in the “Third World.” Women, irrespective of ethnicity, are differentiated by social divisions where class makes the difference between the privileged and the underprivileged who may become actors in the Master-Slave paradigm. Chandra Mohanty (1991) indeed identifies “a common context of struggle” and “a dynamic oppositional agency” of “Third World” women to create “an imagined community of struggle” (7).

Kalpna Wilson (2013) is in line with Mohanty’s (1991) and Spivak’s (1999) view, in which agency takes the form of resistance, “a response of Black and Third World feminist critiques of dominant constructions of ‘Third World women’ as passive victims of oppressive cultures” (Wilson 86). Wilson also notices that the invocation of agency could “undermine attention to... gendered oppression” (87) and that the “rational individual exercising free will” seen in poststructuralist and postcolonialist approaches is a recognition that “potential collective struggles for social transformation...” (87) are marginalised. Monica Ali’s Bangladeshi women who have not migrated and still live in Bangladesh can indeed be analysed by using this approach, as women fail to get actively involved in “collective struggles” and, instead, look for individual solutions to survive at a more individual level.

² The term “Third World” is used between inverted commas, as by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in order to emphasise that it inaccurately defines developing countries in opposition and as inferior to “First World” ones. The term was introduced during the Cold War and it includes postcolonial countries from Africa, Latin America, Oceania and Asia.

Another form of agency is understood as choice/freedom as choice. Nancy Hirschmann (2003), as paraphrased by Sumi Madhok (2013), sees choice as moving beyond one's ability to make a choice, to one's "opportunity and power to meaningfully participate in the construction of choice" (Madhok 103). If Hirschmann focuses on choice, others such as Marilyn Friedman (2003), Diana Meyers (2000) or M. Oshana (2005), theorise agency in connection to the idea of autonomy based on rationality (cf. Madhok 2013). With these theories in mind, Madhok emphasises the significance of what is called "contexts of patriarchal oppression" (103) and invites us to cease equating agency with free/unfree act (action), resistance or autonomy:

Instead, I argue that we must shift our theoretical gaze away from these overt actions to an analysis of critical reflections, motivations, desires, and aspects of our ethical activity. (Madhok 106)

Nevertheless, the previous approaches seem to be rather far from an understanding of agency within Muslim communities, as it is explained by Talal Asad (2003), quoted by Mary Evans (2013):

... appropriate agency and its exercise are articulated by responsibility, a responsibility not merely of the agent but of the entire community of Muslims severally and collectively.... There is therefore a continuous, unresolved tension between responsibility as individual and metaphysical on the one hand, and as collective and quotidian on the other – that is between eschatology and sociology. (Asad ctd. in Evans 59-60).

One of the analytical categories inter-connected with agency is "sisterhood" understood as female solidarity and not as the feminist concept that refers to global sisterhood.³ Gayatri Spivak (1999) says that "... the subject of feminism is produced by the performative of a declaration of independence, which must necessarily state itself as already given, in a constative statement of women's identity and/or solidarity, natural, historical, social, psychological" but warns that if done in "a triumphant mode," solidarity "must want 'to celebrate the female rather than deconstruct the male'" (112).

Ali explores "sisterhood" between the women in Bangladesh through their bond as workers in the same factory, thus showing work and the public space to be preferred vehicles for the emergence and development of "sisterhood" among lower class Bangladeshi women. The emphasis here is on "vehicle" as it must be understood as a means that facilitates/may facilitate "sisterhood" which in its

³ See Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*. The concept of global sisterhood was first challenged and theorised by Black feminists such as bell hooks in "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity among Women."

turn facilitates/may facilitate agency, but not as final goal. This emphasis is made because the writer demonstrates that being a worker and staying one are not implicit in these women's existence. They can get work, sacrifice their reputation for it, and they may also lose it. Similarly, women may fight to gain agency without any certainty of success.

As mentioned earlier, "sisterhood" is frequently confronted by patriarchy supported by community and impacted by women's love relationships (official or not). This paper shows the way in which society and community, characterised by patriarchal power, obstructs or deters women's agency from evolving. There is a paradoxical situation in which the state supports women's participation in the private sector as paid workers, allowing them to take controlled action, while men in higher positions in the hierarchical order have the power to decide women's (non)involvement in matters of the public sphere. Meanwhile, society and/or community expresses its disapproval with respect to women's taking paid work performed in public spaces, unmonitored by families and husbands. Love and patriarchy are therefore two other analytical categories that come to better define the impact of patriarchy over women's agency.

Historical Context

Monica Ali has carefully chosen the dates of Hasina's letters to her sister Nazneen, a Bangladeshi living in London, in order to highlight various historical contexts; she makes these letters available to the audience to read and thus be informed about the lives and (non)agency of Bangladeshi women who stayed in their country of origin.

Bangladesh is a fairly young country. After the partition of India in 1947, it was known as East Pakistan and after its war of independence became a republic in 1971. It is also a country that at the time needed financial support for development which it got from international conglomerates such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Hasina's letters to Nazneen start to arrive in the 1980s; the correspondence goes on throughout the 1990s, inconsistently continuing until the beginning of the twenty-first century. The historical and socio-political context in Bangladesh is characterised first by "Ziaur Rahman's⁴ policies of capitalist industrialization and state-sponsored Islamization," which "continued under the military regime of his successor General H.M. Ershad"⁵ (Siddiqi 211); all this is mentioned in one of Hasina's letters. Siddiqi's description of the political and economic context of the country in that period emphasises the economic liberalisation programme which "laid the groundwork for the unprecedented success of the export-oriented garment manufacturing industry," also the largest "employer of female industrial labor"

⁴ President of Bangladesh (1977-81).

⁵ President of Bangladesh (1983-90).

(Siddiqi 211). However, despite women being given access to the public space and paid work, they became “cheap sources of labour” (Feldman, paraphrased by Siddiqi 211) as their work was underpaid and work hours were long. Meanwhile, Islam was declared the state religion in Bangladesh in 1988 (cf. Siddiqi 211), the political arena turning relatively more “religious” than before. A powerful religious party in the country, Jamaat-i-Islami, began to advocate “separate educational and work facilities for women” (Siddiqi 212), along with a “motivation of women to observe purdah” (Jamaat-i-Islami, *Manifesto*).

For the analysis of Hasina’s letters during the 1980s and the 1990s, one takes into account that the political power in Bangladesh was taken over by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (Siddiqi 213) which continued with an agenda “associated with a highly visible code of conduct for women, especially in the realm of dress and comportment and in family relations” (Beinin and Stork ctd. in Siddiqi). At the turn of the century, the protagonist’s letters reveal the social class difference existent among women, which Hasina perceives as positive due to her continuous optimism and trust in women’s support (“sisterhood”). Thus, the political context is less emphasised in her latter correspondence (not precluding the economic aspects of developing Bangladesh) in favour of a portrayal of Hasina’s life that develops mostly in the private space of her new employer.

Patriarchy and Women’s Agency

A significant part of Ali’s depiction of Hasina’s life experience takes place in Dhaka through the 1980s-1990s. The protagonist gives short and frequent accounts of the political and economic arenas of Bangladesh, opinions which are nevertheless not hers. Having eloped with a boy she was in love with, whom she had to leave due to domestic violence, the protagonist finds a protector in a business man, Mr. Chowdhuri, whose views and positions with respect to politics are emulated by Hasina. Therefore, what the reader gets regarding the social, political and economic context is rarely filtered through Hasina’s own mind, being more like a second-hand account or recounting. She describes the setting of her livelihood as one marked by generalised corruption at all levels of society and life. When she recounts the strikes organised by various groups of people, her understanding is that corruption (which she calls “cheating”) has spread so much that it has become the means to generate equality among individuals:

University is also close down. All students hold protest. They rallying for right to cheat. In my heart I support. Some who afford pay the professor for tutoring buy exam paper. To be fair all must have mean for equal cheating. (104)

It is not clear though if by “all” Hasina also includes women. One may nevertheless notice that “equal cheating” cannot be applied to the lower class

women, such as the protagonist, as it is applicable only to those who have power or have access to power. In many developing countries such as Bangladesh, the state has used women as the foundation of the national project by making them “members in the Grameen Bank, the workers in the garment industry, the women who helped to dramatically reduce the population growth rate” (Siddiqi 213). This picture might appear positive on the surface but in fact it portrays women as lacking agency understood as free will (Hirschmann) or as their own motivations and desires or even as ethical activity (Madhok). This assertion is supported by the fact that Ali's female characters in Dhaka, Bangladesh are hardly driven by an ethical urge to help the community or society at large. Without pronouncing judgment, one emphasises the fact that need and poverty are the incentives that make these women act by taking paid jobs in the public space. Despite the state's gratitude towards them for their contribution to the benefit of all – as it has been popularly presented – society and community felt and openly expressed hostility towards *female* garment workers. Siddiqi presents it as a general situation in which male garment workers are marginalised due to the feminisation of labour:

... in an economic context that marginalizes male labor, their high profile occupation renders garment workers permanently and peculiarly anomalous, for factory workers call into question not only their own respectability but also the new social order configured by globalization and the feminization of labor. This is one explanation for the hostility, mainly verbal, to which most garment workers are subjected in public places. (Siddiqi 215)

In Monica Ali's account of the social status and community/society's treatment of the “garment girls,” as the women who work in the garment factory are called, this hostility is clearly exhibited in relation to female rather than male workers. There are several episodes in which Hasina tells her sister Nazneen about the aversion manifested against these women both by community (Hasina's neighbour Zainab often makes bitter comments about the dubious reputation of such women) and by society (groups who protest against women being allowed or taking the freedom to work outside the home and in the proximity of male workers who are not members of their families). In one episode, Zainab mockingly says: “Better be careful. Let the jute men find out a garment girl here and then it is trouble” (Ali 106). Similarly, organised groups made up of members of the larger society manifest their disapproval of the new social structure in labour by finding scapegoats (the female garment workers), on whom to blame its dissatisfactions, frustrations and “impurities”:

Some people making trouble outside factory. They shout to us. 'Here come the garment girls. Choose the one you like.' A mullah organize whole entire thing. Day and night they playing religious message with loudspeaker. They say it sinful for men and women working together. But they the one sinning take Gods name give insult to us and tell lie. (Ali 106)

Hasina's reply to mean comments such as Zainab's (and those of societal groups, had she had the courage to retort to their face) is brave enough to make her neighbour drop the topic: "*Pure is in the mind. Keep yourself pure in mind and God will protect.... I keep purdah in the mind no one can take it*" (106). One particularity that Hasina notices, this time without re-stating one of Mr. Chowdhuri's opinions, is that women's reputation ("bad name," as she calls it) is vulnerable only in the case of poor women who are easily victimised while women connected to men in high social circles (such as President Ershad's girlfriend) are immune to gossip and social opposition.

The fragility of the garment girls' reputation is emphasised when Hasina is laid off by the factory manager. Due to her closeness to Mr. Chowdhuri, from whose protection she benefited without initially guessing his real intentions, as well as her friendship with a young man in the factory (Abdul), the protagonist gains a "bad name" that threatens to undermine the name of the company as well. When called into the manager's office, it is she who gets sacked while Abdul, forced to lie about Hasina's "purity" in order to save himself, is simply forgiven with a sexist comment from the manager: "*Pretty girl eh? You boys! Have to get a little practice in before marriage eh?*" (113).

Interpreting Talal Asad's theorisation of women's agency in Muslim communities, Mary Evans notes:

... a woman in a Muslim community is expected to recognise her responsibility to the values of the community; hence her agency is directed towards the articulation of that responsibility through the endorsement and visible manifestation of the community rules.... But in all cases agency is not a straightforward attribute; it is always mediated by values and practices of the particular community. (Evans 60)

Although seen as a Western view of patriarchal control over female sexuality (cf. Evans), the agency-responsibility-gender paradigm can be applied to *Brick Lane* thus explaining the "impediments to agential activity" (Madhok 104) in the case of women such as Hasina. Their responsibility towards society/community is not equally met halfway by the society/community. The hostility, abandonment and cruelty manifested by the community and society at large and specifically by representatives of male power (the manager) are proof of non-responsibility towards women who, left to fate's mercy, may fall into prostitution (see Hasina) thus losing (almost) all hope to rehabilitate their reputation. Ali's portrayal of the Bangladeshi society is rather stereotypical, probably meant to emphasise the differences existent between Eastern societies (of which Hasina is a member) and Western ones (to which the other sister, Nazneen, hopes to belong). The end of the novel, in which Nazneen remains in the UK concentrating on her life there while the letters to her sister in Bangladesh become less frequent, reveals the

author's preference for the West over the East in terms of opportunities vs. corruption and lack of freedom for women.

In line with Madhok's understanding that agency "would pay attention to the sociality of persons and to the particularities of social and historical circumstances in which persons fulfil their moral obligations and pursue life plans and choices; it would display a certain content neutrality in respect of our preferences; and finally, it would be predicated upon a non-insistence on maximal or free action" (106-107), this article has looked at the socio-political and historical circumstances in which the protagonist(s) appear while searching for her potential "life plans and choices" that take precedence over agency understood as "free action." The novel shows that in contexts of patriarchal oppression, working/lower class women are coerced to make "life plans and choices" only within the boundaries set by men and their society/community.

Love and Agency

Love is an analytical category inter-connected with patriarchy and "sisterhood" in the analysis of agency of Bangladeshi women (living in Bangladesh) in *Brick Lane*. Regarded from the "love" point of view, Hasina's sense of agency is rather fluctuating, unstable. In the beginning of the novel, readers are made to believe that of the two sisters, it is Hasina who is more likely to perform "agential activity" (Madhok 104) as, unlike Nazneen, she kicks against her fate, a metaphor symbolising agency as free will, autonomy and ability to act ("kick") and react against patriarchal norms ("fate"). As it has been discussed in the previous section, the younger sister, though more strong willed as a child and later as a young adult, lives to learn that kicking against one's fate (manifesting one's agency as freedom to act or decision-making) can have negative, painful consequences for the woman.

Hasina narrates her multiple stories of love as a girl who elopes with one of her father's field workers, Malek. In South Asian societies such as Bangladesh, the general norm is still arranged marriage (Grover), elopement being not only to be avoided but unwanted altogether as it brings shame and dishonour upon the couple's families. In societies/communities where marriage invests women with agency because it provides the framework for their "pursu[ing] life plans and choices" (Madhok 106), Hasina's gesture, made out of love, can be translated as renouncing her agency rather than asserting it. It is indeed a different perception of agency from the Western one based on free will and freedom of action.

Taking Talal Asad's perspective on agency as responsibility to others in the particular context of Muslim communities and Madhok's version of agency as fulfilment of moral obligations and pursuance of life plans and freedom of choice, without insisting on free action, one may say, in the context of love and its impact on women's agency, that it is only love as legitimate marriage (arranged marriage) as opposed to heterosexual relationships that enables women's agency

to exist. It is only through the support for woman implicit in arranged marriage that women are invested with the context for agential activity (Madhok 104). In other words, as it may be seen in the novel, agency is disguised as a wife's loyalty and submissiveness in order to reach a particular target. Aleya, one of Hasina's best friends and a co-worker in the garment factory, is married and has several children. Out of all her friends, only Aleya has a sense of agency as outlined above. Being a married woman, with her husband accompanying her to and from work in order to both monitor her and to protect her reputation (his presence confers her and consequently, the whole family, a good name), Aleya can pursue concrete life plans (getting education for her sons) even in spite of domestic violence (as the husband becomes jealous).

Unlike Aleya, Hasina cannot pursue life plans other than mere survival. Her days can only be described as good or bad but they cannot be said to bring hope for the future. In her situation (married in a way considered shameful, a fact she hides from her friends, and poor, without a family), she constantly needs protection, which she finds in various men. After being sacked, Hasina is shown looking for a way out, trying to sell almost anything she could manufacture herself. Her proactive-ness, as admirable as it may seem, cannot be equated with agency. The outcome of her endeavour is so insignificant that the free will or freedom of action that is understood as agency appears rather contemptible: the little she gets from selling the toys she makes cannot pay her rent or buy her food; since her reputation is spoiled, she also cannot fulfil her moral obligations towards society.

Another understanding of agency is choice. Yet, it is not choice that Hasina performs: she does not choose to leave her job; she does not choose to let Mr. Chowdhuri take care of her (she lets herself go with the flow); she does not choose to become a prostitute; it is not her choice to marry again nor to leave her new husband. Poverty and her innocence made Hasina trust that Mr. Chowdhuri has good intentions towards her. Poverty and lack of protection after Mr. Chowdhuri turns her into his mistress results in Hasina becoming a prostitute and accepting a new protector, Hussain. When Hussain gets ill and can no longer protect her, Hasina accepts the marriage proposal of another man, Ahmed, who can offer her a home. As she is forced to leave him as well due to the man's excessive jealousy that results in domestic violence, the protagonist finally takes a job as the servant of a rich woman that does not involve the direct protection of men.

A different type of love approached by Ali in the novel is unofficial heterosexual relationships. With her many protectors and "lovers," Hasina is another kind of Draupadi or Dopdi. In *In Other Worlds*, Gayatri Spivak explains that Draupadi/Dropdi "provides the only example of polyandry, not a common system of marriage in India" (251). Draupadi has five legitimate husbands while Hasina has five "lovers" (Malek cannot be considered a "real" husband as they

did not comply with the norms of arranged marriage): Malek, Mr. Chowdhuri, Abdul, Hussain and Ahmed (not counting the anonymous men that visited her when she was a prostitute). Spivak asserts that “Draupadi’s legitimized pluralization (as a wife among husbands) in singularity (as a possible mother or harlot) is used to demonstrate male glory” (251-52). Comparatively, Hasina is pluralised but unlike Draupadi lacks legitimacy. According to Spivak who has compared Draupadi of the *Mahabharata* with Dopdi from Mahasweta Devi’s story, Draupadi of the first version is helped by Lord Krishna when “the enemy chief begins to pull at Draupadi’s *sari*” (Spivak 252) in order to strip her. But “Draupadi cannot be publicly stripped,” clothing turning into the Idea of Sustaining Law (252.). On the contrary, Dopdi, “remains publicly naked at her own insistence,” thus stopping male leadership (252):

It is when she crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could *only happen to a woman* that she emerges as the most powerful ‘subject,’ who, still using the language of sexual ‘honor,’ can derisively call herself ‘the object of your search,’ whom the author can describe as a terrifying superobject – ‘an unarmed target.’ (252)

Hasina can therefore be more easily compared to Dopdi (she is “stripped,” unveiled, raped) up to the point where agency intervenes. But unlike Dopdi, Hasina is not her own agent. She is not stripped at her own insistence. She is raped and the raping continues for as long as it is necessary for her to keep her room (either without paying rent, when Mr. Chowdhuri starts raping her on a regular basis, or paying rent when she became a prostitute).

The protagonist’s own view on agency is nevertheless described by action and determination to never give up, to resist against all odds. Towards the end of the novel, working as a maid in an upper-middle class family, the protagonist talks about her mother, Amma, and the latter’s suicide as a sign of renunciation and ultimately of lack of agency:

Amma always say we are women what can we do? If she live now I know what she say I know it too well. But I am not like her. Waiting around. Suffering around. So many ways. At the end only she act. She who think all path is closed for her. She take the only one forbidden. (Ali 324)

If from the perspectives described by Asad (2003) and by Madhok (2013), Hasina cannot have agency, from the protagonist’s point of view, responsibility towards the community and marriage are not prerequisites of agency. Action, acceptance and determination to move on are. There is no preferred understanding of agency. In this paper, agency in the context of Bangladeshi women in Bangladesh has been analysed using several perspectives, each with its own significance. For

this reason, it has been previously asserted that agency is an “unstable” category which can change its meaning.

“Sisterhood” and Agency

This section investigates the role of “sisterhood” in Bangladeshi women’s sense of agency, co-related with the impact of patriarchy and of love (as marriage or heterosexual relationships) in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*. This novel is replete with female characters who live either in the Bangladeshi community in East End London or in Bangladesh itself. As diaspora studies has become of interest in many universities and academic institutions worldwide, the study of diasporic women has taken precedence over that of women who stayed put. “Staying put” is however an inaccurate term as women who still live in the “Third World” are often mobile, changing locations and sometimes leaving behind families in search of work or for reasons that involve love. Thus, they may be running (from home) because of love or they run away from love (when it turns into domestic violence) in search of other homes. It is not unusual that these women are likely to form “sisterhoods” (female bonding) that provide them support in the new life circumstances in which they suddenly find themselves. Having said this, the protagonist that becomes the centre of this analysis is not Nazneen, the sister who lives in the diaspora, but Hasina (who lives in Bangladesh). Since “sisterhood” and agency are not the sole province of First World countries and discourses, one must inquire into other discourses (and cultures) where “sisterhoods” may occur and women may attempt to reclaim their agency.

The first question that may be asked in this context is “why is it important to investigate ‘sisterhood’ in connection with agency?” or “how does ‘sisterhood’ enable agency?” (if it does enable it). It has been mentioned in the beginning of this paper that “sisterhood” is an analytical category which reflects the bond that is created among women, a bond based on the mutual support (emotional or of a more pragmatic nature) of those that are part of the “sisterhood.” This analysis reviews two types of relations among women. The writer presents both poor working-class and upper middle class women.

Hasina as a “garment girl” who works in a factory, in many of the letters she sends to Nazneen, speaks of her friendship with three other “garment girls.” As she herself acknowledges, the factory and work itself create an ambience that is favourable for “sisterhood” to occur and grow. Location (the room where women work) can be understood as the protector of female bonding as long as women are careful not to jeopardise their reputation. For the protagonist, “working is like cure” (Ali 106), enabling women to experience “true friendship and true love” (106). Hasina introduces her new friends to Nazneen, as well as some of the prejudices that some people have with respect to others or other communities:

We all talk together in lunch break. Four in my row stick like sister. Aleya Shahnaz Renu and me. I tell you about them my other sisters. Aleya have five children and she comes from Noakhali. All our lives we think Noakhalis never wash they smell like jackfruits but I give my vow as a true fact Aleya do not smell. Money she make she send her boys to school. Husband make problem for her but Aleya thinking of children only not the husband. (105)

Aleya is the “sister” who, being “properly” married, has responsibilities to the husband and the community – a requirement understood as agency in Muslim communities (cf. Asad). Nevertheless, Aleya has a goal (to make education accessible to her boys) that, because its fulfilment requires the woman to work, comes in opposition to her role/responsibilities expected by the husband/community. In spite of the beatings she gets from her jealous husband, she continues coming to work. The emotional support that the other women give her strengthens her sense of agency, one that reflects the pursuance of a goal (Madhok) rather than responsibility to community:

We giving Aleya our love is best thing we can give. Shahnaz say husband get jealous bearing all gossip about garment girls. Renu say few bad ones spoiling for all. (109)

Another one of her friends and the one Hasina likes best is Shahnaz. Almost the same age as Hasina, Shahnaz is not married yet. Her opinion about marriage and more importantly about dowry is rather radical and in opposition to traditional views:

Shahnaz is only bit older one two year than me and she gone very far along in school. Most day she talking about match. Parents have pick seven eight boys but Shahnaz refuse all. and she disagree to dowry. 'Why should we give dowry? I am not a burden. I make money. I am the dowry.' (105)

When one young man in the factory starts behaving in an over-friendly manner with Hasina, Shahnaz warns her about him. Later on, when everybody is avoiding her, Shahnaz tries to find out the truth but eventually turns her back on her as Hasina's reputation is compromised. Consequently, the writer points out that in patriarchal societies/communities, “sisterhoods” such as the female bonds between Hasina and her friends are fragile due to the impact of patriarchy and their love relationships. In Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Desirable Daughters*, one of the female protagonists affirms that reputation is the most valuable thing for a woman; when one loses it, all is lost. This opinion may also be applied to Ali's Hasina who, the moment her reputation is stained (even if unfairly), not only loses all her chances to gain agency, but has to abase herself to the most repudiated, “impure” and therefore marginalised level of society (prostitution).

She can no longer get support from her “sisters” or else their reputation will suffer as well.

Another of Hasina’s friends when she was working in the factory is a woman called Renu. She became a widow at fifteen, soon after her marriage to a much older man, and never re-married. As the custom for women who leave the conjugal home or are widowed, is to return to their natal homes to benefit from the protection of the family (represented by the father or a brother) (Grover), Renu also goes to her parents’ home but is soon banished by her father: “*She go back to father short time he throw out*” (105). Growing up (like Nazneen, Hasina’s elder sister) with the belief that a woman is weak and needs the protection of a man, Renu believes in fate without giving one thought to the power of action (as agency). Asked if she would re-marry, she replies: “*Who will marry these bones?... My life! My life! Over at fifteen. Might as well be a Hindu. His grave big enough for two. Why I did not jump in?*” (105.). Hasina continues:

She say there is no one to protect me. I must go here and there always alone. Anyone say anything they like because I am woman alone. I put here on earth to suffer. I am waiting and suffering. This is all. (105)

The writer uses symmetry in her portrayal of fate as a symbol of women’s lack of agency: first it is Amma (Hasina and Nazneen’s mother) for whom the fate of women is to suffer in silence, then it is young Nazneen who thinks that one has to endure in life, and in the end it is Renu who believes that suffering co-related with lack of action is woman’s destiny. Women’s lives looked at from this perspective, includes no roles as agents, but only as passive spectators of other people’s lives. Under these circumstances, “sisterhood” female bonding, although existent, is powerless in front of patriarchy.

Just as class difference among Bangladeshi women in the UK is approached by Monica Ali (see the women living in Brick Lane versus Dr. Azad’s wife), the writer also introduces class as a social division operating at the level of women who live in Bangladesh. Thus, after Hasina has to leave her second husband (Ahmed), she finds work as a maid in an upper-middle class family. Although Hasina is still portrayed as being good-hearted and even innocent with respect to unequal and complex social relations, the author points to moments when she is aware of the difference between her (and other lower class women) and sophisticated women such as Lovely, the woman she works for.

Hasina’s friend Monju (also a working class woman) is in hospital because she refused to give her seven-day old son to her husband to sell. Ali brings up delicate issues such as acid throwing and baby kidnapping and selling (Monju’s husband has thrown acid onto her, also injuring the boy’s leg; the man and his sister are said to be involved in baby trafficking – male babies were sold to Indian families). As shown in the novel, it is a woman (the husband’s sister) who held

Monju down so that the man could throw acid on her. In this sense, Siddiqi asserts that “rising poverty and inequity” in Bangladesh has translated into “growing incidence of trafficking, prostitution, and dowry demands” (215). Thus, by applying this context to *Brick Lane*, one identifies one woman-enemy (Monju’s sister-in-law) and one woman-friend (Hasina). Monju’s agency consists in her self-sacrifice, which constitutes a refusal to give away her baby boy. Hasina’s agency is contained in her struggle to find the funds necessary for Monju’s medicine as well as for the boy’s operation. The attempts made by Hasina to request her mistress Lovely to find the money, demonstrates that the class difference between the two women may jeopardise “sisterhood.” Lovely is a woman whose occupation is to manage various associations addressed to the helping of those in need (charities). When Hasina asks her to find a solution for Monju’s son, Lovely is not in a hurry to offer help, reckoning that she does not know any charity that deals with that particular problem. It is only due to Hasina’s insistence that the funds are eventually found and “sisterhood” as female bonding and mutual support is re-established.

Gender similarity does not imply permanent “sisterhood” among women who live in Bangladesh, either among those of the same social class (Hasina and her fellow “garment girls”) or those belonging to different social classes (Hasina and her employer). Furthermore, it is frequently disrupted by patriarchal power and by the impact of various relationships (official or not). However, there is always a stronger emphasis on the similarities rather than the differences existing among them.

Conclusion

It has been asserted in this analysis that “sisterhood” is inter-connected with patriarchy and love in the analysis of agency. Since the protagonists studied here live in a deeply entrenched patriarchal society, the novel presents the circumstances of their lives while taking a glimpse at their (non)agency. It is almost assumed that women’s agency does not exist in patriarchal societies that impose strict rules and norms for women in the private and especially public spheres/spaces. The author has demonstrated that work and the location of work for women create the circumstances necessary for “sisterhood” to occur. Nonetheless, the mere presence of women in a common location where they work does not make female bonding implicit. It is confined by women’s need to maintain a “good name” (good reputation) which destabilises their access to agency in either its Western understanding (freedom of action or of choice) or its non-Western one (responsibility to others or pursuing life plans).

Love as an analytical category comes to strengthen the power of patriarchy due to the rules applied by society (and in this case, by the state) which perpetuate unequal power relations between men and women. This is the point where “sisterhood” may occur having the power to disturb patriarchal norms by creating

a common and strong bond of mutual support among women. It is not a form of rejection but rather one of resistance or, better yet, of common affirmation of women's worth in the face of male abuse of any kind.

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