

Negotiating Hyphenated Identities: A Psychoanalytic Study Of Immigration In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the psychoanalytic dimensions of immigration and marginalisation in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, concentrating on the challenges encountered by South Asian immigrants and their hyphenated identities. Utilising Salman Akhtar's psychoanalytic framework, it investigates the emotional and psychological journey of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi immigrant residing in London, as she faces cultural dislocation, displacement, and the process of identity formation. The idea of "hyphenated identity" illustrates her difficulty in reconciling tradition with modernity, home with exile, and personal aspirations with societal pressures. This analysis emphasises *Brick Lane* as a powerful examination of the psychological intricacies confronted by diasporic communities.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Psychoanalysis, Hyphenated Identity, Immigration, Cultural Displacement.*

INTRODUCTION:

Migration is more than just a change of location; it represents a psychological transformation that greatly affects a person's identity. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) serves as an important literary work for exploring the intricacies of identity development, cultural dislocation, and the psychological challenges faced by South Asian immigrants in the UK. Central to the narrative is a profoundly reflective portrayal of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman who finds herself in an unfamiliar Western setting due to an arranged marriage with the much older Chanu. Uprooted from her village due to her sister Hasina's defiance of family norms, Nazneen encounters difficulties with language, cultural dislocation, and emotional solitude. Residing in a strict immigrant community, she raises two daughters and gradually cultivates a sense of self as she learns English and builds relationships with others. Her connection with Karim, a British-born Bangladeshi, sparks her emotional awakening but also underscores how others impose their identities on her. Ultimately, Nazneen chooses independence, marking her transformation from passive endurance to a self-defined identity. Her journey of emotional growth and cultural integration provides a significant perspective for examining "hyphenated identities": a concept referring to individuals who navigate between two different cultural backgrounds. Utilising the psychoanalytic lens established by Salman Akhtar, this paper investigates how immigration, dislocation, and marginalisation shape personal identity and affect the collective mindset of diasporic communities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Salman Akhtar, a well-known psychoanalyst, offers a profound perspective on the emotional challenges associated with migration. He highlights five central themes that impact migrants: loss, guilt, mistrust, self-doubt, and confusion regarding identity. "The immigrant suffers a disorganization of the internal world akin to a psychic earthquake; the resultant cracks in the ego structure may lead to regression, anxiety, and identity diffusion." (Akhtar, 1999). Akhtar asserts that migration frequently causes a rupture in one's sense of self, particularly when individuals find themselves caught in the intersection of two cultures. This sense of being "in-between" creates a transitional space where the person struggles to merge their past with their current life, resulting in psychological ambivalence and emotional strain.

Akhtar's theory becomes particularly pertinent when examining the psychological dynamics of Nazneen in *Brick Lane*. Her experience symbolises not just physical relocation but also a significant internal struggle as she seeks to balance her Bangladeshi roots with her existence in modern-day London.

Immigration, Displacement, and Cultural Ambivalence

Nazneen's relocation from a rural Bangladeshi village to the vibrant urban setting of London signifies a major psychological shift. In her early days in England, she does not feel a sense of adventure, but instead experiences a deep sense of confinement, ensnared in an unfamiliar apartment that feels more like a tomb than an inviting home, and feeling disconnected from her body, which she struggles to see as her own. The feeling of displacement is heightened by cultural alienation and the lack of language, community, and cherished traditions. According to León and Rebeca Grinberg, migrants often experience "disorienting anxiety" due to conflicting emotions about the homeland and the host country (Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989). In this state of confusion, Nazneen introspects, seeking comfort in dreams and recollections of her homeland, which seem much more vivid and emotionally impactful than her real-life experiences in England:

"Nazneen fell asleep on the sofa. She looked out across jade-green Rice fields and swimming in the cool dark lake. She walked arm-in-arm to school with Hasina, and skipped part of the way and fell and they dusted their knees with their hands. And the mynah birds called from the trees, and the goats fretted by, and the big sad water buffaloes passed like a funeral. And heaven, which was high above, was wide and empty and the land stretched out ahead and she could see to the very end of it, where the earth smudged the sky in a dark blue line." (Ali, 2003)

Salman Akhtar (1999) emphasises that immigration is never a neutral event; it is a psychologically traumatic experience, regardless of whether it is voluntary or involuntary. The trauma stems from the sudden detachment from one's cultural anchors and the emotional difficulty of reconstructing identity in an alien setting. Nazneen's internal conflict, her nostalgic yearning, and her inability to fully process the loss of her former life reflect what Akhtar describes as the immigrant's mourning process- a deep, often unspoken grief for everything left behind. This unresolved mourning ensnares her in a liminal space between two realms, resulting in a state of cultural ambivalence. Her mental state remains in limbo, torn between recollections of a communal past and the isolating reality of diasporic existence, a conflict that characterises the hyphenated identity of numerous immigrants.

Hyphenated Identities and the Immigrant Psyche

Nazneen's transformation in identity illustrates the concept of the "hyphenated self": a dual experience where she must navigate between Bangladeshi traditions and British customs. Her gradual engagement with the outside world through motherhood, her friendship with Razia, and a romantic relationship with Karim sparks a complicated internal struggle. She begins to challenge the defined roles of wife, mother, and immigrant woman.

"The immigrant self evolves into a 'hyphenated identity' - a synthesis of the lost past and the emergent present - often accompanied by inner conflict and emotional ambivalence." (Akhtar, 1999)

As noted by Akhtar, immigrant identities frequently experience fragmentation as people face conflicting cultural expectations. Julia Kristeva echoes this psychological ambivalence, asserting that "one becomes a foreigner in another country because one is already a foreigner from within" (Kristeva 1991). Nazneen's internal conflict between her traditional upbringing and the liberal, often contradictory values of her new surroundings leads to both psychological distress and eventual development. Her relationship with Karim, for instance, embodies both a sense of freedom and guilt, emphasising her changing yet conflicted identity.

While Karim views Nazneen as a representation of authenticity: a "true" Bangladeshi woman, his perception reflects the experience of diaspora, longing to hold on to an idealised cultural history (Ali, 2003). In contrast, Nazneen's ultimate rejection of both Chanu and Karim signifies her empowerment in forming a hybrid identity, separate from the men who attempted to define her.

Gendered Experience, Narrative and Psychological Realism

Gender dynamics highly influence Monica Ali's depiction of Nazneen. Women living in Brick Lane endure dual marginalisation, not only as immigrants but also as women within patriarchal and

conservative structures. This phenomenon of "double displacement" is essential to understanding their psychological resilience or breakdown.

Nazneen's growth is shaped by her cultural upbringing and her personal experiences. The advice from her mother to "endure" acts as the emotional basis from which she evolves (Ali, 2003). However, as she gains financial independence and emotional control, Nazneen starts to question the values she has inherited. Akhtar notes that female immigrants tend to show greater adaptability and resilience when given opportunities for independence (Akhtar, 1999). This is illustrated by Nazneen's empowerment through her home sewing business, which provides her with both financial autonomy and increased self-esteem. Her evolution from passivity to assertiveness illustrates a psychological journey from repression to self-actualisation—a fundamental theme in psychoanalytic development.

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is notable not only for its depiction of the diasporic experience but also for its adept use of psychological realism as a narrative approach to delve into the inner lives of its characters. Through Nazneen's slow shift from passive acceptance to active self-determination, Ali crafts a deeply nuanced bildungsroman that goes beyond cultural stereotypes. Michael Perfect argues that instead of reinforcing cultural clichés, Ali "offers an alternative, positive viewpoint on the experience of migration and existence in the diaspora," emphasising the protagonist's autonomy and adaptability amid displacement and tradition (Perfect, 2008). By examining Nazneen's emotional growth within the frameworks of both patriarchal and immigrant narratives, Ali places personal development at the core of the story, thereby situating the novel within the Western bildungsroman tradition while challenging its colonial notions (Perfect, 2008).

Ali's narrative style also emphasizes the psychological intricacies of diasporic identity through her use of internal thoughts, dream sequences, and symbolic imagery. Critics like Jane Hiddleston perceive this approach as part of a postmodern and postcolonial context, claiming that Ali's portrayal of "hidden, particularly female, lives" serves both political and literary purposes by illuminating marginalized voices through a contemporary perspective (Hiddleston, 2005). Likewise, Alistair Cormack notes the conflict between realism and multicultural complexity in Ali's writing, highlighting that the "doublings" of hybrid cultural and psychological frameworks are frequently oversimplified within linear Western narrative structures (Cormack, 2006). However, Ali adeptly broadens the limits of realism by weaving in unconscious elements: dreams, fantasies, and emotional disarray, that mirror the psychological distress faced by immigrants. Her characters, especially Nazneen, Chanu, and Shahana, are characterized not only by their social positions but also by their emotional reactions to migration, influenced by both individual histories and wider cultural dynamics. This combination of form and theme allows *Brick Lane* to stand out as a significant work within both postcolonial literature and psychoanalytic narrative traditions.

Intergenerational Identity Conflict

The intergenerational tension depicted in *Brick Lane* offers a profound examination of the psychological gap between immigrant parents and their offspring. While Nazneen comes to England as a young woman compelled to migrate, her youth enables her to gradually adapt to her new surroundings over time. On the other hand, her children, particularly Shahana, represent the second-generation diaspora, individuals who are born into a culture that seems alien yet are expected to maintain traditions they have not directly learned. Akhtar (1999) emphasizes that immigration should be viewed from multiple viewpoints, with age being an essential factor in shaping responses to displacement. Older immigrants frequently find assimilation to be a more challenging process, while younger ones, despite being more adaptable, still face the psychological impact of cultural dissonance.

Shahana's character highlights the distinct difficulties encountered by children of immigrants. She resists her father Chanu's attempts to impose Bangladeshi traditions and expresses frustration over her perceived lack of autonomy, feeling resentment for being born into a life influenced by choices she did not make.

"I hate it when you talk about Bangladesh. I hate Bangladesh. You can't make me go. I'm not going. I was born here. This is my home." (Ali, 2003)

Her rejection of cultural norms is not merely an act of rebellion but rather a psychological reaction to the challenges of balancing two conflicting identities. Akhtar observes that second-generation immigrants frequently undergo identity fragmentation, straddling the value systems of their parents and the prevailing culture around them. In *Brick Lane*, this struggle is vividly portrayed through Shahana's emotional

reactions and her yearning to fully embrace British culture. The conflict she represents illustrates a broader generational tension between maintaining inherited culture and the desire to assimilate, highlighting the intricacies of establishing a coherent self-identity in a diasporic context.

Assimilation and Identity Formation in a Hyphenated Self

Nazneen's journey in *Brick Lane* marks a shift from passive submission to active self-definition, illustrating the psychoanalytic process of individuation. As Yasmin Hussain explains, "*Diasporic South Asian women often find themselves negotiating between inherited cultural expectations and the demands of the host society, which creates a complex, and often contradictory, space of identity formation*" (Hussain, 2005). Through her internal struggle and gradual empowerment, she learns to reconcile the tensions between her Bangladeshi roots and British surroundings. Influenced by Salman Akhtar's theory of migrant psychology, Nazneen's identity evolves from a state of fragmentation to one of integration. Her hyphenated self, once a source of conflict, becomes a space for transformation, allowing her to navigate both cultures without abandoning either. This psychological growth reflects the possibility of building a coherent identity within the complexities of diaspora.

This synthesis reflects a form of psychological integration. It does not erase her origins; instead, it combines multiple aspects of herself into a unified whole. As she takes charge of her household finances, gives her daughters more freedom than she had, and ultimately decides to stay in London without Chanu or Karim, Nazneen reclaims her story. Her integration is not just social; it is deeply personal and psychological. It develops through inner conflict, sadness, and eventual acceptance. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, her ability to handle complexity without losing herself shows the successful creation of identity amidst displacement. *Brick Lane* thus becomes more than a story of migration. It is a deep exploration of how a person can reconstruct themselves by navigating different identities.

CONCLUSION

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* offers a nuanced portrayal of hyphenated identities shaped by immigration, cultural ambivalence, and personal transformation. Through Nazneen's psychological journey, the novel highlights how migrant women, when given opportunities, adapt and assert themselves more effectively than their male counterparts. Drawing on Salman Akhtar's psychoanalytic insights, Nazneen's shift from passive acceptance to empowered hybridity reflects the emotional complexity of migration. Her identity is not divided, but redefined through resilience and self-awareness. *Brick Lane* ultimately presents the immigrant experience as both challenging and transformative, making it a vital study of identity negotiation in diasporic life.

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