MAPPING THE METAPHORS OF NAMES AND IDENTITY IN MONICA ALI'S BRICK LANE

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Abstract

Monica Ali is a young promising British writer who in her novel Brick Lane recounts the diasporic experiences of Bangladeshi immigrants settled in the East End corner of London. In this novel, Ali has strategically projected the intricacies of human lives through metaphorical names in which the primarily used words or phrases can be reread to draw out its suggestive or implied meaning. The names of the characters and the places cited in the novel are symbolically used which needs to be intensely analyzed and assessed. Thus, the present paper attempts to read the novel from a metaphorical perspective highlighting the significance of the names of her characters which are purposefully selected to represent their distinct individuality and identity.

Key Words: metaphor, representation, name, identity, Bangladeshi, diaspora

Monica Ali is a second-generation Bangladeshi diaspora writer living in England. Her debut novel Brick Lane (2003) relates the diasporic experiences of the immigrants who have migrated to the UK from Bangladesh. She has strategically projected the intricacies of human lives through metaphors in which the primarily used words or phrases can be reread to draw out its suggestive or implied meanings. Even the names of the characters and the places cited

in the novel are symbolic of one or the other thing which needs to be intensely analyzed and assessed.

A name is not just a name. It is the personal identity of an individual as it is closely related to one's social, cultural, religious beliefs, ideas, and ideologies. Monica Ali has meticulously named and purposefully drawn her characters both from Bangladesh and from the Bangladeshi Diaspora community, who have migrated from Bangladesh and settled in the UK in search of better prospects of life. Even the title of her novel *Brick Lane* is symbolic and speaks beyond its surface meaning.

Ali's novel *Brick Lane* is named after a street in the East End corner of London which is basically populated by the Bengali immigrants of Bangladesh. The street is popular for curry houses and restaurants opened and owned by the immigrants of the Sylhet region of Bangladesh, who are engaged in various types of commercial activities in the street. However, Ali's concern in writing the novel is not merely the street, *Brick Lane*, but rather the particular ethnic group of people inhabiting the region with their sprawling socio-cultural history and struggle to establish an identity of their own. It is a narrative of space inhabited by the Bangladeshi diaspora community and their attempt to identify themselves with the new place. The migrants of Bangladesh in the UK have their own issues and concerns which have been justifiably delved into by Monica Ali. Thus, the title of the novel is suggestive of the immigrant Bangladeshi community living in the region and their experiences in the new land.

By creating a host of characters like Nazneen, Hasina, Chanu, Razia, Mrs. Islam, etc., Monica Ali sneaks into the lives of the Bangladeshi people living both in Bangladesh and in diaspora along with their personal and political exertions to establish an identity of their own. 'Nazneen' is one of the most realistic characters drawn by Monica Ali in her novel. She is named Nazneen by her mother, Rupban. After being born as a premature child and declared a stillborn by Banesa, Nazneen's mother wastes no time to give a name to her daughter before

she dies nameless. Thus, by naming her daughter, 'Nazneen'- meaning exquisitely beautiful, elegant, or delicate, Rupban not only gives a name to her daughter but also an identity to which she must identify herself for the rest of her life. She is left to her fate for survival by Rupban who herself firmly believes in the fatalistic principle of "What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne" (16). She attempts to teach Nazneen to adhere to the traditional norm of accepting her fate as it is and never to go against it. She is constantly reminded of her premature birth and how she was left to her fate for her survival. Nazneen's birth and the uncertainty of her survival make Rupban even more conservative about Nazneen and her idea towards life. Rupban wants Nazneen to acquire the qualities and attributes of a good Muslim woman to enhance her inner beauty and elegance. She is advised to be "still in her heart and mind, to accept the Grace of God, to treat life with the same indifference as it would treat her" (6).

Thus, Monica Ali has created Nazneen's character as a metaphor of a woman, whose identity has been shaped and structured by the established traditional norms. She is described as a 'solemn child' who is taught not to complain or regret. As she grows up to be 'a wide-faced, watchful girl' she is obliged to accept a man who is twice her age as her husband. She says "Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma." (16).

However, Nazneen's migration to the UK after her marriage acts as a catalyst that enables her to undergo slow and steady metamorphosis. The various situations which she encounters as a woman migrant in her day-to-day life bring a drastic change in her character and attitude towards life. Chanu's sluggish patriarchal behavior, her inability to speak English, and courage to venture through the unknown street of Brick Lane, the skating couples, and their sense of confidence and independent spirit provoke Nazneen to cross the threshold of her

apartment and to explore the outside world. She steadily becomes conscious in the postcolonial Bangladeshi Muslim women community. Nazneen's migration enables her to rediscover herself. It changes her perception of her life and identity as a woman. It empowers her to introspect within and discern her desires rather than living her life as scripted by others. Her decision to explore the unknown street of Brick Lane aggravates her desire for liberty which allows her to peep into the snobbish English world which hardly recognizes her presence as an individual. However, when she interacts with a stranger in English and she is understood and recognized, her self-esteem is raised. Thus, Nazneen is surrounded by many 'life patterns' (40) which enable her to taste life in its truest sense.

Nazneen's self-constraining identity is instilled in her by her mother, Rupban who herself is a victim of male- do patriarchal Muslim society. She sees submissiveness as the prime quality of women's identity. Ali has drawn her character to represent the traditionally defined conservative identity of women in a male-dominated society that places women in a comparatively inferior place to men. Nazneen's upbringing in a patriarchal society is surrounded by narrow convictions of gender-biased social and cultural practices that teach women to accept everything in the name of fate, apart from it her marriage and migration to a completely new world change her perception towards her identity. Thus, Nazneen metaphorically grows from a girl who has been taught to accept her fate as it is to a woman who learns to write her destiny by making her personal choices.

'Hasina' in Arabic means extremely beautiful. Monica Ali has portrayed Nazneen's younger sister, Hasina to be extremely beautiful and free-spirited. She describes her as a "heart-shaped face", with 'pomegranate-pink lips' and 'liquid eyes' (51). Unlike Nazneen whose life is controlled by the principles set by Banesa and Rupban, Hasina chooses to write her own destiny. She goes against the traditional norms and elopes for the sake of love but once she

notices that she has entered into an abusive relationship, she is courageous enough to leave her husband. She represents the new age woman of Bangladesh who is ready to take a stand for herself. In her struggle to live her life on her own terms and conditions, Hasina faces many impediments yet she remains strong and firm throughout the novel. Her character blooms even amidst adverse situations. In fact, she becomes a source of inspiration for Nazneen, who has migrated to the US after her marriage to Chanu.

Monica Ali through the character of Hasina also attempts to highlight the plight of the women working in the garments factories and their exploitation. By working in a garment factory Hasina becomes economically independent but she has to face frequent taunts and social negations for being a single woman. She is accused of having secret affairs with her co-worker and is made to leave her job. Her self esteem is rapidly crushed when she is raped and exploited by the elderly, Mr. Choudhry. Circumstances push her into flesh trade yet, she remains resolved to the choices of her life. When she receives the marriage proposal from Ahmed she thinks it to be love but again it turns out to be physical attraction which soon dies out. Thus, she enters a destitution camp, from where she is rescued by a couple who gives her new hopes and motive to live her life afresh (220). Hasina's beauty, with which she is identified at the beginning of the novel becomes the main cause of her undoing. Her physical beauty gradually starts to fade but she retains the inner beauty by giving a supporting hand to a helpless woman fighting against the harsh realities of life.

Chanu who is comically projected in the novel, metaphorically represents the frustrated migrants who have migrated to the UK in the hope of a better career opportunity. He migrated to the UK with the expectation of establishing a successful career for himself with the high ambition of joining the civil services and serving the administrative system, however even after years of struggle and earning of many degrees nothing valuable is achieved by him. He

becomes the victim of racial discrimination and in his frustration, he resigns from the council only to become a taxi driver. Chanu is described as a jolly and loud man with sad eyes (42). His name is metaphoric of both his character and personality. It is suggestive of his round, huge and bulging body which gives him a comical feature. He represents the patriarchal institute which positions woman at a lower place and confines them within the four walls of the house. This could be assessed by his behavior towards his wife, Nazneen, and daughters Sahana and Bibi. After the migration of Nazneen to the UK he discourages her from leaving the apartment rather he confines her in the household work. Chanu looks down on the other migrants and considers them as illegal migrants who have entered the country without any proper paper. Through his character, Ali pathetically highlights the cruel reality of racism that the migrants like Chanu and Karim have to suffer. Even after being well educated and possessing high degrees he is not treated better than the illegal migrants who have migrated to UK through illegal means. Chanu says “These people here didn’t know the difference between me, who stepped off an aeroplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only lice on their heads.” (34). Chanu also points out how people like him have to work hard but the reward they get is very meager.

Karim is a second-generation young radical migrant who is actively involved in politically organizing the Islamic migrant community living in Brick Lane, London under the name of the Bengal Tiger. He represents the second generation youth who tries to find his cultural identity by raising the sentiment of the Bangladeshi migrants and voicing against the racial discrimination that the Muslim migrants, in general, have to suffer especially after the 9/11 terror attack. He enters Nazneen’s life as a middle man who brings clothes to her for sewing. He comes with a bale of jeans over his broad shoulders (209). His entry in Nazneen’s life at a time after she has mopped up the bloat from the toilet is symbolic. He is also a migrant

who faces a problem when he speaks in Bengali but when he spoke in English, he was very fluent (210). He says “this is my country” (212) he firmly identifies himself with England. He is suggestively named as Karim as it is also one of the names of God in Islam in Quran. He is projected as a redeemer who will redeem the suffering of the Muslim migrants by forming a group to fight for their rights. Thus, helping the Muslim migrants to find an identity which is continuously denied to the migrants particularly the muslim migrants.

Monica Ali has deliberately named her characters and places to provide a deeper insight into the individual character’s identity and the places related to them. The names of their characters are metaphoric at several instances which become synonymous with the characteristics embodied in their personality and their ideological beliefs. Thus, Ali’s attempt through this novel is to provide a glimpse into the life of the Bangladeshi people and their changing aspirations in the globalized world.

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