



DR. Rashmi Dubey

Monika Ali's Brick Lane : A Saga of Nazneen's Awakening and Emancipation

Assistant Professor Department of English D.B.S. College, Kanpur (U.P.) India

Received-20.09.2022, Revised-24.09.2022, Accepted-29.09.2022 E-mail: aaryavart2013@gmail.com

Abstract: *Brick Lane is the debut novel of Monika Ali, a Bangladeshi born author. In most of her novels specially in Brick Lane Ali portrays the problem of quest for identity and gendered expectations of women all over the world. In this patriarchal society women have nomadic existence and whenever they have to immigrant from one place to another, they suffer with the profound loss of confidence and their native belonging. They feel a sense of loss, dissolation, discomfort, alienation when they have to leave their country for the sake marriage.*

Key Words: primitive societies, basic mechanism, reinforced, patriarchal family structure, restrictions.

Since the primitive societies marriage is the basic mechanism by which patriarchy is maintained. The contract of marriage is not written in any law book but case law reinforced the husband's authority and in order to protect the patriarchal family structure it has imposed many restrictions on the activities of the wife. She is continuously guarded and monitored so that her husband's honour can remain intact. She is relegated inside her home. The same is the case of Nazneen in Monika Ali's Brick Lane. The novel opens with the birth of Nazneen in 1967 when Banesa gives birth to an immature girl, who is no more than a puppet in the hands of the Fate and by her mother's decision she is not taken to hospital for any treatment. Banesa, her mother, is a true representation of the Bangladeshi people who are believed to be fatalists. She always surrenders before the unquestioning will of fate and consciously or unconsciously Nazneen also develops the similar theory of her mother and says, "Just wait and see that's all we can do." (Ali 36) Banesa tries to inculcate the same perseverance in Nazneen as whenever she tries to raise any question she consoles her with tears, "If God wanted us to ask question, he would have made us men," (Ali 64) and she also involves in this passive submission before the patriarchal society believing that, "what could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne." (Ali 11) Since the beginning of her life Nazneen is a victim of her fate which goes on follow her, control her and rule her life wherever she goes. This makes her believe the story of fate, "How you were left to your Fate --- Not once did (she) question the logic of the story." (Ali 15) She learnt the saying of her mother by heart when she says her "to be still in her heart and mind, to accept the Grace of God, to treat life with the same indifference with which it would treat her." (Ali 15) With the same indifference she accepts Chanu with whom she has to pass the rest of her life though his face seems her to be 'a face like a frog.' (Ali 12) She is only 18 when she comes to Tower Hamlets in London.

She suffers from the sense of loneliness as she does not know English and there is no one to talk to her. Their marriage proves to be a problematic marriage and she feels suffocated by the over possessiveness of Chanu as he is so caught in his mental prison of traditions that she is not permitted to talk freely and travel alone. Chanu himself wants to change with the change in time and place but cannot change his conviction that women should stick to traditions at any cost. There are numberless examples of his rigidness scattered throughout the novel. The role of a wife is only to keep the house and give birth. He has married Nazneen only because she is a 'good worker' and an 'unspoiled girl from the village' Whose 'Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children' (Ali 23) Even years after their marriage there is no change in his thoughts as he says, "when I married her, I said : she is a good worker. Girl from the village. All the clever-clever girls are not worth one hair on her head." (Ali 207) Thus Chanu in a way acts like a crusher trading on the delicate dreams of Nazneen and everyday she faces the same challenge in her life.

She wants to flee away from the reality of her marriage. She feels unable to accept the intolerable moments



of her married life. She becomes a prey to isolation and alienation and the person lying next to her make it more and more serious. Every morning she has to suffer through the same torture and anxiety as everyday before opening her eyes her mental conflict starts and she thinks : "If I were the wishing type. I know what I would wish. And then she opened her eyes and saw Chanu's puffy face on the pillow next to her, his lips parted indignantly ever as he slept. She saw the pink dressing table with the curly side mirror, and the monstrous black wardrobe that claimed most of the room. Was it cheating? To think, I know what I would wish? Was it not the same as making the wish? If she knew what the wish would be, then somewhere in her heart she had already made it." (Ali 13) This type of sensibility is suggestive of her strong urge to free herself from the clutches of Chanu and to experience life outside the four corners of her home. Chanu is so dominating and conservative that he knows how to clip the wings of Nazneen whenever she want to fly even in imagination. When once she asks to go out alone Chanu rebukes her in the following manner "why should you go out?" ... said Chanu, 'If you go out, ten people will say, "I saw her walking on the street." And I will look like a fool : Besides, I get everything for you that you need from the shops..... if you were in Bangladesh you would not go out.

Coming here you are not missing anything, only broadening your horizons." (Ali 45) Chanu belongs to the society where a husband is held responsible for any behaviour or mistake of his wife. He can do anything for her protection. Besides scolding her he can also beat her whenever she disobeys him, "not in rage but out of charity and concern for her sole." (Dobash 47) Chanu think that he is the only one who can widen her horizons as she is not supposed to do so by herself because he is her master, protector and provider. Thus they represent the years old Bengali married couple who cannot break their communal boundaries. Chanu never tries to consider the opinions of his wife. There is always a conflict between his Bengali reputation and the westernization of his habits during his fifteen years stay in Brick Lane. Sometimes he changes colour like a chameleon to suit its environment. As sometimes he consoles her saying that he is western therefore understands her request but as other people are ignorant therefore he has to forbid her for certain things.

Here Nazneen represents the oriental woman who demands education only to be heard but reality is totally different as says Edward said in his book Orientalism : "Western discourse on the oriental women assumes that she never speaks for herself, either through emotions or history. It is the man, the husband, the brother or the father, who represents and gives her a voice but not an opinion." (Said : 6) This holds true in case of Nazneen as whenever she says somethings she expresses it as the opinions of Chanu as she tells her friend Razia, "My husband says they are recist, particularly Mr. Dalloway. He thinks he will get the promotion, He says that if he painted his skin pink and white then there would be no problem." (Ali 72) The repetition of the words like 'he says', 'he thinks', 'my husband says' reflect as if she has nothing to express of her own. Though apparently she expresses nothing but there is always a sense of irritation, silent rebellion and a strong aversion towards Chanu starting from her first reaction to Chanu's frog like face and her feeling of revolt reaches to its peak after the birth of Rakib, her first child as she says : "Why did her father marry her off to this man? He just wanted to get rid of me, she thought. He wanted me to go away, so that I would not be any trouble to him. He did not care who took me off his hands. If I had known what this marriage would be, what this man would be (Ali 82)

But at the next moment she consoles herself and thinks that Chanu is not so bad. By and by with the passage of time her loneliness becomes tolerable. Her acquaintance with Razia, who becomes the most influential character and the closest friend in her life, has changed the meaning of everything. "regular prayer, regular housework, regular visits with Razia. She told her mind to be still. She told her heart, do not beat with fear, do not beat with desire." (Ali 40) And according to the views of Nayar her new insight is the product of "ego" or the "conscious" level of her psyche as it is the source of our decision making and rational thought. (Nayar 65) Then there are signs of intelligence,



subtlety and mental growth. In the meantime she becomes a mother of two daughters Shahana and Bibi but Rakib dies and Nazneen is now accustomed to her act as a good mother and a good wife. The television in her flat works like a window to stretch her imagination. Now she can explore the world which was not accessible to her due to the gender ideology of her husband and his community. She can assimilate the lifestyle of mainstream London society on whose threshold she was forced to wait. Nazneen used to watch the so called, "Ice skating" (Ali 36) as Cormack acquaints her readers with the content of the TV programme she watches. He states : "To many brought up in Britain in the eighties, it is clear that Nazneen is watching Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean's gold-medal-winning ice dance based on Maurice Ravel's Bolero. Thus for a large portion of Ali's Readerships, the scene is not simply comprehensible but familiar, because it has already been widely disseminated." (709)

But Nazneen's life is full of internal and external turmoil as Chanu has never been settled in any earning source after resigning from the council job and on his wife's continuous insistence he permits her to work from home and has brought a sewing machine for her sewing job. He has started to give her attention and importance as sometimes he calls her "boss women" and she also does everything possible to fulfil his dream of going back to Bangladesh. But there started a new turmoil in her life as unlike their mother Shahana and Bibi are not submissive and supportive. Thus the revolt of her daughters especially Shahana's embarrassment, disobedience, disrespect, constant quarrel and the references of opinion between father and daughter seem to Nazneen that she is "walking through a field of snakes" and she is worried at every step of life. "The eternal three way torture of daughter-father-daughter. How they locked themselves apart at this very close distance. Bibi, silently seeking approval, always hungry. Chanu, quivering with his own needs, always offended. Shahana simmering in worst of all things – perpetual embarrassment, implacably angry. (Ali, 168) During the same turbulence in her life Karim enters in life as a sigh of relief. He is a middleman bringing sewing orders for her. The long repressed desires of Nazneen have their free flow with the arrival of Karim, a leader of Bengal Tigers. Now she began to feel the 'smallness' of her crisis when Karim introduced her with the misery spread all over the world, the destruction of war, children being murdered. Karim opens for her the vistas of a new world. She gets attracted towards Karim who is depicted as, "out and out an attractive western hero --- a modern western man." (Hasan 670) She falls in love with Karim and they develop physical relations.

Then all the commandments of Chanu collapse. This total adoption of western values by Nazneen and her free sexual penetration by Karim does not happen outside but within the four wall of the same home which was the centre point of his traditional values. Karim exploits the sanctity of the sexual morality of Chanu's world. Thus she becomes a victim of "cultural cross-pollination" in the terms of Malak as women are more prone to 'affiliation' a term used by Said for women's identity because women possess an identity, which is 'rhizomic rather than rooted'. (Weiss 183) Thus Karim works like a trigger and changes Nazneen's mindset of the stereotyped role of women in society. This is also the climax of her revolt against Chanu as during her act of sexuality with Karim she is thinking of Chanu to come and see what his wife is doing. She is not a little bit hesitant and frightened to show her defiance to her husband. As says Alastair Cormack, "Karim has been a catalyst, forcing her into an existentialist realization of her bad faith...." Thus, "Nazneen has confronted her oppression within the discourses of gender, race and religion and won for herself an independent space." (Cormack 706) And that space is the world without any Chanu and Karim. She forbids to return to her country with Chanu and now she has understood that Karim is not what she is searching for as he also talks about an idea of home, a Bengali wife and mother with which she is totally fed up. She bids farewell to Karim for the last time for she has attained her personal growth and now she is ready to take the responsibility of her life along with the lives of her growing daughters. East London is their home now and she has finally learnt English. She is now able to take decision unlike the Nazneen in the beginning of the novel. She can now put forth a logical reason of not going back as she feels that her return to Bangladesh would be like : "Dhaka would



be a disaster. Shahana would never forgive her. Chanu would be finished. It was not even going home. She had never been there.” (Ali 426) Now she is free from the clutches of any male figure, no father and husband to tell her what to do as she reflects, “I will decide what do do. I will say what happens to me. I will be the one.” (Ali 405). Thus this transformation of Nazneen from the South Asian model of domestic confinement to her decisive act of flowing into the main-stream of modern life of London finally provide her the social respect and an unyielding courage and confidence which was beyond her imagination for a long time. With her own efforts she, “frees herself from the closed world of a traditional Bangladeshi housewife.” (Eade 32).

REFERENCES

1. Ali, Monika, *Brick Lane*. London : Transworld Publishers, 2003.
2. Cormack, Alistair. “Migration And The Politics of Narrative Form : Realism And The Postcolonial Subject in *Brick Lane*.” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2006, pp. 695-721.
3. Corneck, Alistair. “Migration and Politics of Narrative Form : Realism and the Postcolonial subject in *Brick Lane*.” *Contemporary Literary* 47.4 (2006) : 695-721.
4. Eade, John. “Economic Migrant or Hyphenated British? Writing about Difference in London’s East End.” *The Culture of Economic Migration. International Perspectives*. Eds. Suman Gupta and Tope Ononiyi. London : Routledge, 2007. 22-36.
5. Hasan, Md. Mahmudul. “Review : *Brick Lane*.” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 50.1-2 (2005) 667-72.
6. Malak, Amin. *Muslim Narratives and he Discourse of English*. New York : SUNY Press, 2005.
7. Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory : From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. India : Pearson, 2012.
8. R.E. Dobash & R. Dobash. *Violence Against Wives : A Case Against the Patriarchy*. (New York : Free Press, 1979) 47.
9. Said Edward. *Edward Said : The Last Interview (DVD)* M. Dibb (Director). London ICA Projects, 2002.
10. Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, St. Ives, Penguin Books, 2003.
11. Weiss, Timothy. *Translating Orients : Between Ideology and Utopia*. Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 2004.
