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Representing Third Space and Fluid Identity: Multiculturalism and Transformation in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*

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Abstract:

Among the numerous literary trends that have found its place in Contemporary English Literary Canon, issues relating to immigration studies have generated interest in scholars and readers. There has been restructuring of the literary canon in recent times that have included disciplines as history, philosophy, gender studies and media studies and so on under its framework. In immigration studies there has been a considerable attempt to locate themes such as identity crisis and maladjustment, discrimination. However, this paper shall on the other hand locate how the process of immigration and settlement in a First World country like Britain might offer possibilities of redefinition of selfhood. For this purpose the paper shall contextualize on the two novels, *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali and *The Satanic Verses* (1988) by Salman Rushdie. My argument in this paper shall be to highlight how the characters in multicultural society undergo with the possibilities of plural and fluid identities and cultural displacement due to immigration. The present paper shall study how the 'third space' created by the novels presents dynamic representation of identity in contemporary society of British.

Keywords: Immigration, maladjustment, discrimination, third space.

Introduction

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* are two major contributions to Diaspora Literature. Both the novels deal with immigrant Londoners- the gap between their aspirations and achievements, the clash between native cultures and foreign milieu, the need for assimilation and the fear of dissolution, the reaction of the nationalists and the emergence of the religious fundamentalists. I have deliberately chosen these two authors because they differ in many aspects. To begin with, their country of origin is different. Rushdie comes from India (Pakistan) where he was born and then moved to Britain. On the other hand Monica

Ali, the author of *Brick Lane*, was born in Dhaka, East Pakistan and moved to Boston, England where she was raised. Even though Rushdie was born in India, it was only in 1947 – the same year India gained its independence; we cannot say that he had a first-hand experience of colonialism. Concerning this aspect we can assign both of them to the second generation of postcolonial authors – those who have not lived in the former colonies for part (or most) of their lives.

Hence, their novels can be studied under the term postcolonial. Yet, we can notice that the issues they deal with surpass post-colonialism tradition, and raise the questions like insiders and outsiders and present a controversial view of British society. One more thing I would like to add that these novels show a range of ways how racially diverse people have different experiences of living, and narrating in a multicultural society. Therefore their characters present a contradictory aspect of British culture and identity and as a result they represent the ‘third space’ and a dynamic re-presentation of contemporary Britain.

This paper shall discuss how identities are remapped when posited in multicultural post-war Britain in the fictional works of Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) and Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. Both the novels deal with immigration related issues, yet in a manner that has not been done earlier in Diaspora Studies. Instead of focusing on the problems relating immigration such as maladjustment, discrimination, and translation, the novels highlight how immigration might offer possibilities of re-defining oneself. Rushdie is convinced that migrancy is a dominant trope of our time. Writing in the context of migrant writers in the essay “*Imaginary Homelands*” he reiterates: “*Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy*”

Monica Ali, the author of *Brick Lane*, is born on 20 October 1967 in Dhaka, East Pakistan. Her father was a Bangladeshi and her mother was English. At the age of three she moved to Boston, England where she was brought up. She studied Economics, Philosophy and Politics at Wadham College, Oxford. In 2003, she was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction and also elected Granta’s Best of Young British Novelists. Whereas Salman Rushdie was born in 1947 into a Muslim family in Hinduistic Bombay. Already at the age of thirteen he set his foot in Britain to study there. After his graduation he returned home but this time it was Pakistan that became an independent Muslim state. His first literary success, both critical and commercial, was caused by the publication of his second novel *Midnight’s Children* in 1980. Later, he published two successful and controversial novels *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses* which are characterized by the magic realism style and the immigrant perspective of which he is very conscious. He has been the winner of numerous prestigious awards including “Booker Prize for Fiction”, “Booker of Bookers” and “James Tait Black Memorial Prize”.

The Satanic Verses which locates its setting in London, centers on the diasporic subject related to identity and transgression. The novel presents a multiracial, multicultural society with immigrants from different cultural and religious backgrounds which developed in a setting of black community, Brickhall, London. Its description is “based on a neighbourhood in London’s East End, Brick Lane, where 40,000 Asians people, mostly Muslims from Bengal” (Marzorati, “Fiction’s” 24). While *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali posits East London as its setting with a reflection on the lives of Bangladeshi immigrants. Both the novels attempt to explore plurality in terms of identity.

Ali’s novel *Brick Lane* focuses on the Bangladeshi immigrant population in the late 20th century. The novel centres around a Bangladeshi woman Nazneen, who was married to an expatriate Chanu and migrates to London after that. During the initial years, Nazneen’s contact with the outside world was almost negligible. Like any other woman, she remained confined with domestic chores and knowledge in English was restricted to two words “sorry” and “thank you” (2003:14). At this point homesickness, loneliness added with her pregnancy made Nazneen long for her native land Gouripur, in East Pakistan. According to Weedon (2008), in *Brick Lane*, “as in many diasporic texts, dreams and memories of the lost homeland play a positive role in securing identity and survival” (27). For the first time she feels empowered in London when she moves out from her house into the streets and communicates successfully to a stranger in English (61). Karim’s sudden entry into her life adds her access into public sphere completely. She also takes up sewing in order to have economic independence. Finally she is able to resist Chanu’s decision to return to Dhaka. Asserting her wish strongly, Nazneen refuses to return and forsakes herself from her male counterpart, be it Chanu or Karim. Being exposed to such a multicultural society that permits its woman to freely move out into social spheres, Nazneen finds an identity that is not dependent on anyone. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman puts focus on the fact that “*the problem of identity is a modern phenomenon in that it is brought about by the disassociation of the concept of birth and nation as a once single cause-effect factor*” (2004: 24). Writers, who were racially diverse and were born in Britain, noticed this dis-association and detachment more closely because they found themselves in third space where the culture and tradition of Britain fail to include their plural identity.

Contrary to Nazneen, her husband Chanu is represented suffering from maladjustment. He finds himself alien in foreign land and fails to connect to the adopted country. Moreover, the change that he sees in his two daughters made him shiver and he began feeling outsider in his own family. Iris Marion Young argues that nowadays space cannot be associated with a single and homogenized community, correspondingly the idea of community can no longer be equated with single or similar identity (1990: 153). Both space and identity have become complex categories being influenced by divergent factors at the same time. The novel also reflects how apart from the external differences in opinion there are internal differences as well. No matter how much Chanu tries to force his daughters to learn Bengali and Tagore’s songs, they are not

interested in listening to Bengali music, wore jeans and hated Salwaar kameez. Nazneen's daughters Bibi and Shahana who are teenager and Razia's children Shefali and Tariq reflect an entirely diverse perspective of immigrant experience. These youngsters enjoy the liberties that London offers them. Their assimilation and negotiation into the British culture offer them possibilities of exploring themselves in a different manner. Moreover, Chanu's observation on his difference from the other Bangladeshi immigrants, and his similarity with the educated Dr. Azad reflects how even among the first generation immigrants there are variations.

Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* on the other hand sheds light on more complex aspects of immigration. It is a novel comprising transgression which is an underlying device and is the key challenge of diaspora identity. In juxtaposing the re-imagination of the rise of Islam and the representation of the black immigrant community in London, Rushdie crosses the frontiers of fact, fiction, and opposite cultures and ideas with his different cultural translation of the "authentic" English/Islamic culture.

The main character of Rushdie's *The satanic Verses* is Saladin Chamcha or Salahuddin Chamchawala that (literally) illustrate the situation of the migrant in a world that is still cultural and traditional. The novel is a journey of Saladin to understand himself and his plurality which on the other hand also highlights Rushdie's perception about the condition of all the immigrants around the world. These views are important in order to understand what type of world Rushdie ultimately envisages which moves to plurality. As Rushdie himself emphasized though this book is partly religious and fundamentalist, nevertheless it focuses on translation and immigration above all: "If *The Satanic Verses* is anything, it is a migrant's-eye view of the world. It is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition..." (*Imaginary Homelands* 394).

Particularly, the novel is a journey of Saladin Chamcha to understand himself and his plurality in an ethnically pure country. Whilst there are many characters in *The Satanic Verses* that are multicultural and try to identify their hybrids identity. However the character of Saladin Chamcha is followed most closely by readers and the character literally represents the hybrid situation as reclaimed by a world that dislikes and fears the "Other." On the other hand, Gibreel Farishta, the other main character in *The Satanic Verses*, also experiences a big physical transformation in the novel; nonetheless, this transformation is mostly religion centered, although his changeover is followed by some cultural and traditional elements as well.

To a great extent, *The Satanic Verses* depicts the indecisive selection of diasporic subject between remaining whole and adaptation, its yearning for a united identity, and their ultimate liberty from that illusion. Its cultural and traditional representation depicts the landscape of the imperial center to make evident the city's innate "Third Space," its diverse culture, and its vivacity. Cultures, are in a process of formation that involves "the remapping of cultural

identities and practices for all those involved” (1997: 210; emphasis in the original). In transgressing frontier crossing, no doubt Rushdie efficiently shift the diasporic psychosis into a motivation for the renewal.

Another aspect of diasporic subject is identity, which is vigorously expressed in *The Satanic Verses*, that focuses on the aspect of cultural translation and the transgressive mode. This paper is written with the aim to analyze how the characters of his novels experience the problems of identity and how they are attached with the issues related to Pakistani and Indian post colonial society. For as Rushdie has stated, *The Satanic Verses* is about individuals facing the problems of translating themselves into a new culture ("Good Faith" 394) and the use of the word "translation" in the text of the novel itself occurs as a word descriptive of one's sense of identity. In fact, the self-image of a stable identity that one has, is, just a comforting self illusion that one produces in collision with one's culture which is highly unstable and fragmented though it tends to be stable and coherent (Tyson, 2006: 257). Tyson rightly observes: "*We don't really have an identity because the word identity implies that we consist of one, singular self, but in fact we are multiple and fragmented, consisting at any moment of any number of conflicting beliefs, desires, fears, anxieties, and intentions . . .*" (Tyson, 2006: 257)

To speak powerfully, *The Satanic Verses* is about the renewing and transforming possibilities of translation. Of course this newness has been born as a result of frontier crossing however the formation of the new means a rise like phoenix which arises itself from ashes, that is evidently illustrated in *The Satanic Verses* as "To be born again, first you have to die" (SV 403). On the other hand to be reborn after death means constant hurtful slit of individual—the rupture between the "good" (remaining intact with one's religion, Islamic culture and tradition,) and the "evil" (being secular, modern, and deracinate) - and the awkward mingling of present and the past. If the act of transgression blurs the borders between different worlds, then the diaspora people find it the most difficult task to cross over the space among them, or to adjust them to the situation of in-betweenness. In the opening of the essay, we find that this dilemma certainly brings us to the previous considered questions: "Who was I? What was I? What am I? Who was I?" These questions imply not only the breach of time but also the cleft of space. Liz Bondi's observation, therefore, seems to be justified in this case, when he rightly says that there is a direct relation between identity and space, arguing "who am I?" depends on "Where am I?" (1993:85).

As Rushdie explains the major themes of *The Satanic Verses* in his 1990 essay, "*In Good Faith*", *The Satanic Verses: celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass*

migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love song to our mongrel selves (394).

Similarly the characters in *Brick Lane* also experience the journey in time and space since in turn they journey through the transformations of their selves. For an example, the reader notices that the novel is the journey of an eighteen-year old girl, Nazneen who is migrated from her nativelyland in Gouripur, Bangladesh to Towers Hamlet London after getting married to Chanu and how she deal with her immigration. The reader also finds that Chanu, Nazneen's husband, has been residing in London for many years and is a character that occupies a space of perpetual displacement that can also be explained as being in a state of movement. Stuart Hall's observation, therefore, seems to be justified in this case, when he says — "Migration is a one way trip. There is no "home" to go back to" (Baker et al, 1996: 115). Once they leave their home or homeland, the migrants get transformed or translated into 'homeless' beings who can hardly dream of a possible return.

To conclude this paper I would argue that *Brick Lane* and *The Satanic Verses* portray such a multicultural society that is open to change and invests in its residents a desire for self exploration. Therefore these novels represent a dynamic view of contemporary British society, which stress hybrid identity and thus, provide the 'third space' (1990:211). Thus, in such a situation, the question of identity and belongingness for the extended generations of indentured migrants becomes crucial and problematic. They are neither Indians nor Pakistani or Bangladeshi, there is another possibility of their identity — the unaccommodated and unrepresented 'in-between.' Therefore, the novels under analysis challenge the idea of ethnically identical view of contemporary British culture and society. In their fiction, Salman and Ali represent a hybrid reality that is not strange for them but a part of their ordinary life experience. Both the novel project alternative 'representational spaces' and confirm unusual ways of being British and depicts different ways of residing in a multicultural society of Britain. Both the novels illuminate the themes of translation of person into another being. This paper seeks to demonstrate how the term "translation" and the dynamics that are associated with the actual process of translating a text can be used as a model for discussing the transformation of character identity within *The Satanic Verses* as well as in *Brick Lane*.

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