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## Multiculturalism: A Study of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

Fakhare Alam

Research Scholar

Department of English & MEL

University of Lucknow

### Abstract:

*Brick Lane* is replete with the issues pertaining to multiculturalism. The novel explores the issues related to multiculturalism in more detail and assesses the relevance of it in present scenario. Throwing light on the life styles, work patterns, family structure, and cultural, social, economic and religious dynamics of the Bangladeshi community in Brick Lane, London, the novel brings into light multicultural agenda. The study of the novel shows that multiculturalism has been successful only to some extent in obtaining its goal while in most cases it seems to have failed. At the level of first-generation male immigrants it appears to have failed, but in the case of first generation female immigrants it seems to be successful. The novel also shows that instead of establishing social harmony, multiculturalism engenders family conflict and disharmony and remains silent about the question of unfair treatment after being integrated into the host culture.

**Keywords: Multiculturalism, Immigrant, First-Generation Immigrant, Second-Generation Immigrant, Assimilation, Politics of Recognition.**

Monica Ali was born in 1967 in Dhaka, then the part of East Pakistan, to a Bengali father and English mother. During the war of independence in 1971 the Ali family managed to escape to Britain, where they settled and started a shop of jewellery and trinkets for a short time. Later her father taught for the Open University and her mother became a counsellor. Monica Ali graduated from Oxford and then worked in publishing and design. She married a management consultant Simon Torrance, with whom she has two children, Felix and Schumi. She started writing short stories after the birth of their first child and her first novel *Brick Lane* took her eighteen months to finish.

*Brick Lane* received positive reviews. It was shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award and the Booker Prize. Critics tended to view the novel as a record of immigrants' experience comparing it with the work of Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith and Salman Rushdie. Nevertheless, Ali herself claims she did not write the novel purely under the influence of an immigrant's experience or as an inspiration by other famous authors coming from former colonies and dealing with postcolonial issues. She declares to have created her work under the influence of Jane Austen, Vladimir Nabokov, Iris Murdoch and John Updike.

The term multiculturalism generally denotes an applied ideology of racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity within the demographics of a specified place, usually at the scale of an organisation such as school, business, city or nation. It is frequently used to describe the ethnic diversity that exists everywhere in the world today. It refers to a society in which several cultures exist. Culture plays a central role in multiculturalist argument. Culture refers

to a shared system of meaning in terms of which people understand themselves and the world and organise their individual and collective lives. It includes views about the nature of the self, its relations to others, Man's place in the world, the meaning and the significance of human activities, relations and the human life in general, moral values and ideals, etc. It provides a framework, an intellectual and moral compass in terms of which human beings conduct their way through life.

Gerd Baumann states that "culture is not a real thing, but an abstract and purely analytical notion." A society's culture is embodied in its beliefs, practices, rituals, literature, moral vocabulary, proverbs, sense of humour, body language, ways of organizing different areas of life, and jokes. In case of multicultural society, different groups of people do not share a common vision, conceptual vocabulary and organizing principles. Their structures of beliefs and practices vary, and so do their values, literature, historical memories, etc. in which their cultures are articulated. Cultural communities are generally conscious of their boundaries and know who does and does not belong to them. Their differences acquire a degree of importance in their own and other's eyes that intracultural do not. When members of a society subscribe to different organizing principles and moral vocabularies and understand and disagree about significant areas of life, the society concerned is multicultural. No two multicultural societies are alike.

Multiculturalism does not mean the blending of cultures leading to a "composite culture." It means cultures should be facilitated to preserve their distinctiveness and the people who belong to different cultures should be ensured equality. It can mean the availability of, and accessibility to, different cultural patterns for individuals, and communities within a given national territory, that is the right to choose one's lifestyle. It can also mean the coexistence of different lifestyles, not always consciously chosen, within the national territory, living together separately as equal but distinct elements.

Multiculturalism encourages immigrants to assimilate into the dominant culture of settled country so that cultural diversity, racial discrimination and socio-economic inequalities could be reduced to some extent and national identity could be ensured. Therefore, it gives birth to four apparently contradictory but actually complimentary processes: homogenization, pluralisation, traditionalization and hybridization. The issues that are loosely grouped together under the heading of it including group representation and rights, the rights and status of immigrants, the openness to different cultures, the acceptance and approval of adherence to an original and authentic ancestral culture are familiar long-standing problems of political theory and practice.

In a broad sense multiculturalism focuses on the consequences of immigration and on the struggle of a range of marginalised groups or on group differences per se. The novel deals with the clash of cultures and conflict of values that create predicament for immigrants and spoil the younger generation of immigrant community, experiences of the Bangladeshi immigrants in London, sense of loss of culture, heritage, identity, racial discrimination and socio-economic injustices that have been the issues of exploration under the heading of

multiculturalism. How clash of cultures and conflict of values affect the life of immigrants and create communication gap between parents and children as well as break down family have been illustrated through various characters.

Noting the conflicts among Nazneen, Chanu and their daughters, the novel seems to want to provide insight into the frustration and disorientation of a particular generation, caught between cultures and struggling to define itself on its own terms, according to its own choices and beliefs. Shahana, daughter of Chanu and Nazneen, born in London and brought up as a Bengali at home and as a Londoner at school, wants to avoid her parents due to different cultural values. She is placed in a convivial 'in-betweenness,' which, at home, neither her mother nor father have yet achieved, and thus this conviviality becomes virtual. Her perception of life is totally different from her parents. Shahana's way of life is entirely English that Chanu dislikes. She does not show any interest in the culture of her parents. When her father is not at home, she frequently talks with her younger sister in English. She watches English programmes on television and does not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her knowledge of Bengali is very poor. She does not know how to write Bengali properly. She wants to wear tight jeans. She hates her kameez and spoils her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on it. She prefers baked beans and burger to dal and fish curry as described thus: "Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans. She hated her Kameez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them. If she could choose between baked beans and dal it was no contest. When Bangladesh was mentioned she pulled a face. She did not know and would not learn that Tagore was more than poet and Nobel laureate, and no less than the true father of her nation. Shahana did not care. Shahana did not want to go back home" (180). Chanu often addresses her tauntingly as "little memsahib." Both hold different opinions of the same thing. For which Chanu has respect and value, Shahana does not have. For example, Chanu has respect and reverence for Tagore, but Shahana has no interest in Tagore. When Nazneen asks Shahana, "Would you like to see your mother grow up? She wriggled a bit and did not answer. Often, she is tormented by the thought of Bangladesh and the inconveniences she would have to face as Chanu says, "In Bangladesh, you will have to brush your teeth with a twig. They do not have toothbrushes... you will have to pour water on your bottom to clean it" (398). Even she does not like to be identified with Bangladesh. Once when a man asks Chanu to which country does he belong, he replies, "I am from India." But Shahana quickly says that "I am from London" (296). She does not hesitate a bit in replying to her father. Once when her father says, "What is this rubbish you are watching, Shahana? She at once replies, "How do you know that it's rubbish if you don't even know what it is?"(319) Shahana's dislike of her parents' culture and adaptation to the culture of the settled country prove the very concept of assimilation that has been one of the most important efforts of multiculturalism. It also shows that different cultures represent different systems of meaning and vision of good life. On the one hand, the process of assimilation has reduced cultural differences between the migrant and the foreigner to some extent. On the other hand, it has created a wide gap among the members of the same family. It is the cultural difference that causes the feeling of isolation in Chanu not only in the host country but also within the family. At the level of second generation immigrant multiculturalism seems to have achieved

its targeted goal. But in case of first generation immigrants it turns out that multiculturalism has completely failed. Instead of promoting cultural harmony it has engendered family disharmony.

Multiculturalism also analyses problems of socio-economic inequalities and stresses equality of immigrants in terms of race and ethnicity. Chanu has come to London with dreams of success and respect as he says: "I am forty years old. . . . I have been in this country for sixteen years. Nearly half my life. When I came I was a young man. I had ambitions. Big dreams. When I got off the aeroplane I had my degree certificate in my suitcase and a few pounds in my pocket. I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me. I was going to join the Civil Service and become Private Secretary to the Prime Minister. . . . That was my plan" (34). But his dreams and illusions are shattered by the hammer of inequality. He says, "He worked hard for respect but he could not find it. There was in the world a great shortage of respect and Chanu was among the famished" (203). He has a perpetual pain of not having what he desired despite the fact that he works hard as he states: "I did this and that. Whatever I could. So much hard work, so little reward" (34). He has several diplomas and certificates from Dhaka and London universities. He wanted to be a British civil servant, head of department, permanent secretary, but he could not succeed. He has no such job that suits his degrees and fulfils his dreams as Nazneen says that "he read too much and it did him no good. . . . How much he knew and how baffled he seemed" (261-62). He has to take up a job of cabdriver. He is humiliated by doing the job of washing dishes in a restaurant. He is treated as a second-class citizen because of not belonging to the same culture or to the same territory. His talent is not recognized and rewarded. Misrecognition of his talent leads to a sense of detachment from the country. When he came to London, he was determined to achieve his goal at any cost as he says, "And I made two promises to myself. I will be a success, come what may" (34). But unfulfilled desire and unexpected treatment on the part of white people cause the feeling of returning to Bangladesh. In his early days in London he used to work hard to chase his target. But now he works hard to collect as much money as make him able to return to Bangladesh. He does not want to continue his life in London because his purpose to come here was not only to make a pile of money but also to secure a distinguished place in the society as he says: "But I did not come here for money. Was I starving in Dhaka? I was not" (35).

Multiculturalism observes the problem of cultural barrier in the process of integration. Human beings are culturally embedded and view the world from within a culture. Cultural barrier and adverse ambience do not easily allow the first generation of immigrants to adopt the culture of the settled country owing to sense of belongingness and cultural diversity. As we see in case of Chanu, Mr. Azad and Nazneen who belong to the first generation of immigrant community. After marriage, Nazneen has come to London to live with her husband. She is anxious to see the environment in which she is living, behaviour and dress of children of Bangladeshi immigrant community and the power of attraction of British culture. She looks surprised to see the game of "Ice-skating" on the television in which a man is in a very tight suit and a woman in a skirt with her uncovered bottom. She describes the dress of Mrs. Azad's daughter as short skirt, top, hair is cut in Western style and her demand for

money to go the pub and be a part of night life in London. The culture in which she has grown up does not allow her to adopt the culture in which she has come to live. She is determined not to leave her own culture and adopt others because the circumstances are not favourable to do so. She says, "Everything should change for them. They do not have to change one thing." She thinks that she has been locked in a room around which there is nothing except the cloud of despair. The statement of Uma Parameshwaram, "Home is where your feet are" makes easy the process of integration into alien culture to immigrants, if they follow. But pain, failure and nostalgia govern the life of immigrants. Only a few of them show mettle by integrating themselves with the new culture."

Immigrants are regarded as "the other" because of either their colonial background or their race. They are viewed with prejudice and also oppressed in some ways. The social prejudices generate the feelings of alienation and dislocation among the immigrants. Chanu tells Nazneen about prejudices of white people in these words: "... to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan" (28). Prejudices towards the immigrants constitute a gap between "the self and the other" and make the immigrant identity be isolated from the society. The isolation is much more psychological rather than physical. Although this isolation may not be observed at physical level, it can be perceived or is much more visible at psychological level

Multiculturalism focuses on the issues resulting from cultural diversity and the policy of integration. It demands specific rights for immigrant community so that they could preserve and promote their cultural distinctiveness. A reading of the novel shows that Chanu and Nazneen are struggling to preserve their cultural identity. To see the dress of Mrs. Azad and Mrs. Azad's daughter and daughter's demand for money to go to the pub, Chanu feels so displeased that he blurts out: "This is the tragedy of our lives. To be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy" (112). Mrs. Azad asks him to explicate his statement. He says, "I am talking about the clash between western values and our own. I am talking about the struggle to assimilate and need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I am talking about children who do not know what their identity is. I am talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I am talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family. I am talking . . . (113). Mrs. Azad interrupts and rebukes him sharply for complicating matters: "Assimilation this, alienation that! Let me tell you a few simple facts. Fact we live in a western society. Fact our children will act more and more like westerners. Fact that's no bad thing. My daughter is free to come and go. Do I wish I had enjoyed myself like her when I was young. Yes!" (113) The above descriptions show the crisis of identity and effort to preserve cultural heritage in a multicultural society and Mrs. Azad's speaking in favour of British culture proves the very concept of assimilation which multiculturalism fosters. As we know in a multicultural society, one may share the culture of the adopted country or not. Both possibilities are there. Different cultures are not being practised by the same community, but also by the same family as we see in case of Mr. And Mrs. Azad, Chanu and his daughter and Razia and her husband. Dr. Azad does not approve the British way of life as Mrs Azad says, "He puts his nose inside a book because the smell of real life offends him." (112-113) He does believe in

homogenous existence of people just like Karim and Chanu. He denounces the process of assimilation and asserts the unequal and unfair treatment after being integrated into the dominant culture as it follows: “This is the tragedy. When you expect to be so-called integrated. But you will never get the same treatment. Never.”(247) The above quote shows that multiculturalism has no solution to the question of unequal treatment after being integrated into dominant culture. Doctor Azad’s attitude towards British culture is totally different from his wife. On the one hand Doctor Azad views British culture as detrimental to the children of immigrants, on the other, Mrs Azad regards it as a means of freedom for children and herself. Doctor Azad is upset about the British way of life while Mrs Azad has completely adapted herself to the British culture. It is the matter of perspective that both hold different opinions of the same culture. Mrs Azad does not integrate into the dominant culture because she would like voluntarily to be part of it. But it is her melancholic hegemonic social structure that enforces her to adopt British culture as a means of liberation.

Multiculturalism reflects racial diversity of multicultural society and acknowledges the freedoms of all members of society. The setting of *Brick Lane* is multicultural with its shift from Bangladesh to London. The novel is set in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, a place in which most Bangladeshi immigrants inhabit. However, the place is not only inhabited by Bangladeshis, but there are also white and black people. A reading of the novel shows that Nazneen has white neighbours: “In the flats immediately next door, there were white people.” (304) Moreover, Bangladeshis meet people from different races when they carry out daily chores. When they go to shops, “a group of African girls tried on shoes [...] a white girl stood in front of a mirror turning this way and that” (392-94), in such a multi-racial society, racial issues cannot be overlooked. Monica Ali does not depict the racial issues specifically. But it can be detected through conversations and descriptions. Without knowledge of its culture and custom, one tends to judge a person by the appearance. When it comes to race, the skin colour of the people is quickly noticed. Speaking of colour, Frantz Fanon cites a quotation from Sir Alan Burns’s *Colour Prejudice* while he is talking about the racial prejudice: “It [colour prejudice] is nothing more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and richer peoples for those whom they consider inferior to themselves, and the bitter resentment of those who are kept in subjection and are so frequently insulted. As colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments. The light-skinned races have come to despise all those of a darker colour, and the dark-skinned peoples will no longer accept without protest the inferior position to which they have been relegated.” (Fanon, 133) Because “colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race”, racism often begins with colour.

To Chanu, the skin colour of people matters a lot. The study of the novel shows that Chanu is a victim of colour discrimination. Colour is a barrier to his promotion. He works for the local council. He has applied for the promotion. He is sure that he would get the promotion as it is explicit in his statement: “I think I am certain of the promotion in any case” (39). He is convinced of his promotion while his colleague, who is also in the line of promotion, is very close to the boss. He does not doubt a little the fairness of the boss as he says: “He thinks he

will get the promotion because he goes to the pub with the boss. He is so stupid he doesn't even realize there is any other way of getting promotion"(37). But ultimately, he does not get the promotion because of not being a white man. Chanu's awareness of racial discrimination and injustice of white people has been expressed by his wife, Nazneen, in the following lines: "My husband says they are racist, particularly Mr. Dalloway. He thinks he will get the promotion, but it will take longer than any white man. He says that if he painted his skin pink and white then there would be no problem. . . . My husband says it is discrimination. . . . He says that racism is built into the system" (72). It is what Chanu has concluded about the racial issues from all his decades of working among the white people. This is institutional racist form of multiculturalism that is still pervasive in most areas of British society. Institutional racism occurs when organizations, businesses, or institutions like schools and police departments discriminate, either deliberately or indirectly, against certain groups of people to limit their rights. This type of racism reflects the cultural assumptions of the dominant group.

Racist attitude of white people towards blacks is also revealed through the knowledge of history of Chanu. Chanu has profound knowledge of history. It is the knowledge of history that makes him expose the racist mentality of white people. To see the conductor, who is an African, he tells his wife that "they were bred for it. Slavery. . . . That's their ancestry. . . . Only the strong survived that. Only the strong ones were wanted; they fetched the highest price. Commerce and natural selection working hand in hand."(99) He is also conscious of discriminating nature and betrayal of white people from the time of colonial period till now: "You see, all my life I have struggled. And for what? What good it has done? I have finished all that. Now, I just take the money. I say thank you. I count it. He put a ball of rice and dal in his mouth and held it inside his cheek" (214). He warns his wife not to make friends with white people in the following lines: "All the time they are polite. They smile they say 'please' this and 'thank you' that. Make no mistake about this, they shake your hand with the right, and with the left they stab you in the back" (72).

Less obvious than skin-colour, culture is a second element used as the embodiment of racism in *Brick Lane*. The perpetuation of racist mentality still exists in different forms while so many years have passed ever since it first took place. At the policy level it has been eradicated long before, but in practice it still persists. It has taken on new forms of hatred and discrimination over time. It is obvious from Karim's statement: "The racists-they cleared out of here ages ago. What about Shibli Rahman? Nazneen recognized the name. The man had been stabbed to death. It could happen again. Thing is, see, they are getting more sophisticated. They don't say race, they say culture, religion" (241). Edward Said also asserts that "culture also becomes one of the most powerful agents of resistance in post-colonial societies" (88). Culture plays an important role in the colonial society. Fanon argues: "If culture is the combination of motor and mental behaviour patterns arising from the encounter of man with nature and with his fellow man, it can be said that racism is indeed a cultural element" (19). To avoid being criticized as racists, people have disguised racism as culture. A study of the novel shows that Chanu even regards his daughters' clothes as a way to show his outrage to the prejudice against both the white people and his countrymen: "If he had a Lion Hearts leaflet in his hand, he wanted his daughters covered. He would not be cowed by these

Muslim-hating peasants. If he saw some girls go by in hijab he became agitated at this display of peasant ignorance. Then the girls went out in their skirts” (265). Dress code is a way to reflect the culture of one’s country. The Bangladeshi women are expected to be well wrapped by their clothes, while skirts are often the choices of western girls. But when Lion Hearts leaflets points out the dress code of Bangladeshi women, Chanu cannot stand the disdainful attitude towards his country’s dressing culture. In order to show his outrage, he requires his daughters to dress exactly according to the Bangladeshi dress code. However, Chanu thinks that his own country’s standard of dress is ignorant although he does not allow his daughter to wear jeans like western youth. When he sees the well wrapped girls, he cannot put up with the idea of ignorance. Being annoyed by the white people’s prejudice against the Bangladeshi dress code, Chanu uses his daughters’ way of dressing as a method to rebel. It is Chanu’s racist idea on dressing cultures of his country and Britain.

The politics of recognition has been at the core of multicultural agenda. The demand for recognition is crucial because of the fear of its opposite, of misrecognition or non-recognition. To not recognize or to misrecognize demeans the other, condemns her to an image (as it reflected in the dominant community) which is negatively stereotypical and lacking in all those characteristics (cultural complexity, philosophical and aesthetic sophistication) by which the other has defined its being in itself, its own self-consciousness. Bauman relates the creation of communities to the need of recognition and public support, but at the same time, communities living in a multicultural society need to organize themselves in order to obtain funds and rights to protect their diversity. Karim, a radical Muslim, does not believe in the strategy of assimilation. He believes in heterogeneity just like Chanu and Dr Azad. A concluding speech in one of the Bengal Tiger’s meetings upholds his belief in difference: “Think global but act local” (287). To him, assimilation means to lose one’s own identity. He thinks one’s cultural identity in a multicultural society can be maintained and preserved through being united. He reveals the power of unity recalling his childhood days: “. . . When I was at school, we used to be chased home every day. People getting beaten up the whole time. Then we got together, turned the tables. One of us got touched, they all paid for it. We went everywhere together, we started to fight, and we got a reputation” (215). The conversation between Karim and Nazneen at a point in the novel also shows the power of unity when they were united and disadvantage of splitting into groups as follows: “We don’t want no trouble. But if they come asking, yeah, we’ll give them what they want. Few years ago-think about it-they’d never dare. We was better organized. Now we’s too busy fighting each other” (240). The second generation of immigrants do not grasp the significance of unity. Therefore, Karim does not agree with the new generation of youngsters who have forgotten their cultural values and traditions and have lost in the razzle and dazzle of foreign culture. He views difference as a means of upholding one’s own culture and tradition and uniting. In his opinion the second generation of immigrants should take action in order to assert their difference instead of letting themselves be assimilated into the host culture: “But now, these kids – they don’t remember how it used to be. They’re in their gangs, and they fight the posse from Camden or King’s Cross. Or from the next estate. Or they stay away from all that, earn good money in the restaurants, and that’s all they care about. They don’t think they can be touched” (215). Dr Azad and Chanu’s claim to be

different from other in a way illustrate their efforts to be recognised in terms of their own cultures. They like to be invisible, but they do not want a little bit to make their presence known in terms of other's cultures. Their determination not to change leads to the feeling of distress, alienation and isolation.

Multicultural and multiracial Britain has been represented as a land of liberties, emancipation and empowerment of women of immigrant community as at the end of the novel Razia tells Nazneen, "This is England. You can do whatever you like" (492). All female characters of the novel seem to struggle for their survival and to be recognised. Ultimately, some of them succeed in achieving recognition through integration into British culture. Recognition occurs at the cost of leaving one's own culture. Nazneen, the heroine of the novel, represents the journey of transformation. She does not find the meaning of life until she stays at home as she says: "But how would she go home? That was the point of being lost" (59). But she realises her true self to which she has been unknown so far and feels empowered for the first time in London when she moves out from her house into the streets and communicates successfully to a stranger in English. Her talking to the unknown man in English gives rise to the feeling of satisfaction and comfort as it follows: "he spoke in English this time. . . . It rained then. And in spite of the rain, and the wind which whipped it into her face, and in spite of the pain in her ankle and arm, and her bladder, and in spite of the fact that she was lost and cold and stupid, she began to feel a little pleased. She had spoken, in English, to a stranger, and she had been understood and acknowledged. It was very little. But it was something" (60-61).

To conclude, we can say that *Brick Lane* is replete with the issues pertaining to multiculturalism. The novel explores the issues related to multiculturalism in more detail and assesses the relevance of it in present scenario. The study of the novel shows that multiculturalism has been successful only to some extent in obtaining its goal while in most cases it seems to have failed. At the level of first-generation male immigrants it appears to have failed, but in the case of first-generation female immigrants it seems to be successful. The novel also shows that instead of establishing social harmony, multiculturalism has engenders family conflict and disharmony, and remains silent about the question of unfair treatment after being integrated into the host culture.

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