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Telling the Diasporic Story: Monica Ali's Narrative Technique in *Brick Lane*

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Abstract:

This paper intends to analyze the narrative technique in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and how it aptly problematizes and balances the nostalgia and the assimilation of the diasporic people. The narrative becomes the linguistic as well as thematic embodiment of the diasporic experiences of Nazneen and Chanu, with its meandering plot, full of cinematic flashbacks to augment the sense of nostalgia, and the ever-increasing strength and glitter which authentically expresses the gradual hybridization of Nazneen. The discussion brings to the fore, the different variations of diasporic identity and its changing meanings based on the different stages of cultural hybridization with reference to characters like Chanu, Nazneen and their daughters; thereby attempting a wholesome representation of the diasporic experience.

Keywords: Diaspora, narrative, hybridity, nostalgia, identity.

The concept of narratives, though existing in the realms of human story-telling endeavours since time immemorial, is a relatively new entrant in the world of western theoretical inquisition. Simplistically speaking, narrative might be described as the technique and aesthetic structuralisation of a story. This is in keeping with the views of the Russian Formalists, who were the first modern masters of Narratology or the study of narratives. However, more recent studies in the field have attributed more connotations to the term. Narrative comes from 'narrate', which means to tell a story in oral or written form, which, in turn, comes from the Latin words 'narrare', that is 'to tell', and 'gnarus' which means 'to know' or 'relate'. Thus, a narrative should perform the dual function of expressing what the speaker or writer wants to say, as well as a subsequent reception and understanding of the same, by the listener or reader. Human cultural consciousness is driven and manipulated by history. But the problem with history is to reconstruct facts into arguments, and it is precisely this purpose that is served by narratives.

Diasporic narratives are, most of the times, characterized by a longing, lingering look back at the memories of the lost homeland and an explication of how this nostalgia paves the path for cultural conflict and identity crisis, hindering the process of assimilation of the diaspora into the main-stream of the adopted land. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) is one of the best examples of this, where the diasporic experiences are delineated through the omniscient narrator with

episodic representation of the pluralist voices of Nazneen and Chanu representing varied viewpoints on the subject. Nostalgia for their homeland Bangladesh is the most dominant trait in the characters of both, Nazneen and especially her husband Chanu, who are first generation immigrants to England. In this, they are typical diasporic characters. Chanu's nostalgia manifests itself through his staunch and persistent adherence to the Bengali language and Bangladeshi cultural ethos at home. He even forces his family to do the same, by laying it down as a rule. The haunting memory of his cultural heritage prompts him to be vigorously defensive against any dilution and tremendously suspicious of any attempts at assimilation by the natives. He repeatedly blames systematically institutionalized British conspiracies for the increasing alcohol and drug problem among the Bangladeshi youth of the London locality of Brick Lane. He even finds western bias against Muslims to be the real reason for his personal and professional failures, whereas, in the course of the novel, we are clearly told that his failures are, primarily, a result of his failure to act on his plans and resolutions. The sense of nostalgia is so strong in Chanu that, throughout the novel, he continuously derides the London culture and craves to return home, to Bangladesh. This is what Ali terms, "the going-home syndrome", quite common among diasporic individuals. But, in the case of Chanu, this is so intense that in the penultimate chapter of the novel, we find him leaving London and actually going back, even leaving his wife and daughters back as they were unwilling to go back to Bangladesh. Ali captures this indomitable urge to return home, quite brilliantly when writing that in Chanu, "The pull of land is stronger even than the pull of blood." (Ali 31)

For Nazneen, the diasporic nostalgia does not manifest itself in mundane daily activities as in Chanu, but rather, in a series of romantic reminiscences prompted by letters written to her by her sister Hasina from Bangladesh. The narrative technique employed here by Ali, to augment the sense of nostalgia, is the technique of cinematic flashbacks. Time and again, we find Nazneen, while reading the letters, being vicariously transported to her childhood in Bangladesh, sitting and playing with her sister and often listening to stories and fables from her mother. This is a stroke of narrative masterclass by the novelist who, through this technique, not only concretizes the sense of longing in her characters and, in turn, make for great reading, but also, presents a brilliantly authentic picture of the tumultuous and volatile political situation of Bangladesh, providing the historical underpinnings of the act of immigration itself. We get to know how there is, "no end of corruption." (Ali 148) We also know from one of Hasina's letters that, "University is also close down. All students hold protest. They rallying for right to cheat." (Ali 148) A glimpse of the segregation and religious bigotry in contemporary Bangladesh is also presented when she writes, "They say it sinful for men and women working together. But they the ones sinning take Gods name give insult to us and tell lie." (Ali 152) This draws great parallel with Romesh Gunsekera's acclaimed novel *Reef* (1994), where Mr. Salgado and Triton leave Sri Lanka owing to the increasing political violence and unrest in the country after the uneasy coalition of the old-fashioned leftists and the new-style nationalists achieve a landslide victory in the general elections and, "Everything is buzzing *men!*" (Gunsekera 163) Mr. Salgado sums up the situation perfectly when he says, "Only people with money are leaving. For England,

Australia. The classic flight of capital.”(Gunsekera 164)It is really interesting to note that it is during these periods of her reminiscence, that Nazneen paints a picture of the Bangladesh of her memories to her daughters, Shahana and Bibi, by telling them stories about her childhood and those that her ‘amma’ told her. In this way, she perpetuates the tradition of oral narratives, endemic to her native culture and also creates a matrilineal narrative of looking at the patriarchal societal order from the fringes, effectively acting as a critic of it.

Diasporic nostalgia leads us to one of the most important theoretical bases in the study of diasporic identity, that is, the theory of ‘cultural hybridity’ as propounded by Homi.K.Bhabha, in his book, *The Location of Culture* (1994). In this book, he applies the physiological concept of hybridization to the socio-cultural domain and defines the term as the colonial forces at work, transforming our idea of cross-cultural relations. This becomes very interesting in the postcolonial setting of this novel in the light of Bhabha’s own argument that colonialism is not something lost in the past but something whose histories and cultures constantly intrude upon the present. Bhabha’s hybridization is a continual process of change and evolution due to perpetual contact between a dominant and a dominated culture, giving rise to newer forms of cultural denominations. As John Hutnyk defines it:

With relation to diaspora, the most conventional accounts assert hybridity as the process of cultural mixing where the diasporic arrivals adopt aspects of the host culture and rework, reform and reconfigure this in production of a new hybrid culture or ‘hybrid identities’.(Kalra, Kaur, Hutnyk 71)

In the case of a diaspora, nostalgia for the lost homeland acts as the strongest impulse in their vehement attempt at defending and maintaining their native cultural legacies in the foreign locale, giving rise to the diasporic resistance towards any attempted acculturation from the dominant host culture. In this regard, the premise is set by Milan Kundera in his novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1999), where he says, “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” (Kundera 4) This conflict between memory and forgetting forms the crux of the diasporic identity crisis. This phenomenon has been beautifully portrayed by Monica Ali through her narrative technique, in its structure as well as its continuously evolving linguistic style.

The process of hybridization and the resistance born out of this conflict, which Bhabha calls an inherent stage in the process of hybridization, is amply manifested in the structure of the narrative of *Brick Lane*. Chanu’s character is portrayed in a process of a strengthening resentment towards the adopted land and its culture and an increasing urge to return to the native land. His characterization moves from a typically dichotomous diasporic character of a frustrated soul, struggling to make his ends meet in the outside world while being a staunch patriarch at home, to a completely disillusioned and detached man, with his only craving being going back to his homeland. His increasing disillusionment has been shown through regular remonstrations and suspicion of the London culture and his only motivation to stay came from the lure of purely

economic gains. However, even that proves to be a nuisance as he is trapped very badly by Mrs. Islam, a known usurer, who keeps taking all his savings, much more than what he owes her, with the help of her two sons who serve as her thugs. So when Dr. Azad offers to pay off the debt, Chanu literally has no other attraction left to stay in London. For him, now the only source of identity in the midst of a cultural apocalypse, lies somewhere, thousands of miles away, near the graves of his ancestors. This is beautifully portrayed in his ruminations about Bangladesh when he tries to persuade Nazneen to return with him and says, "Think of it! Reunited with Hasina, the girls with their aunt, holidays in Cox's Bazaar, maybe the girls would like a little trip to the Sunderbans. They could see a real Bengal Tiger. Ha! Ha, ha. Nazneen? Ha!" (Ali 477) When Nazneen tells him that she and the girls cannot go back with him, Chanu's restrained reply, "I can't stay" (Ali 478), smacks of an almost monkish detachment from the immediate surroundings. One of the most interesting strands of cultural hybridity and resultant identity crisis, woven beautifully in the narrative by Ali is the generational conflict, especially in the case of Chanu. His daughters Shahana and Bibi, being second generation immigrants born in the adopted land, cannot identify with his overwhelming nostalgia and cultural ghettoization, and are in conflict over their different identity affiliations. This conflict has been presented in a much more elaborate and intricate manner by Jhumpa Lahiri, in her book *The Namesake* (2004), where Gogol completely fails to understand and identify with the sentiments of his father Ashoke, at least initially, which leads them to a relationship of perpetual friction and conflict. Of course, Gogol's rebellion is much more pronounced and forms one of the main themes of the novel. However, it can be argued that Shahana shows the germs of a similar reaction in her potential future. She might be considered a potential Gogol in the making. For example, Chanu's strict rules in running the house were always a reason for grief for her. This is evident when Nazneen tells her that they are always supposed to keep to the rules, and she quips back indignantly, "But it's his stupid rule in the first place!" (Ali 193). However, this conflict is best manifested through the medium of language which has been used beautifully to express this. In the course of the novel, we find Shahana repeatedly mocking Chanu over his not so good English, which smacks of his immigrant roots. For example, once, when in a fit of rage, Chanu asks her, "What is the wrong with you?" , she scoffs at him by blowing her fringe and slyly retorting, "Do you mean...What is wrong with you?...Not 'the wrong'" (Ali 201). She, being born and brought up in London, cannot identify with the broken language of her father. Her identity seems to lie more towards the dominant parlance of London than the diasporic creole of her father. He, in turn, calls her a 'memsahib', a sub-continental term meaning a respectable Englishwoman. Here, it acts as a sly way of mocking Shahana through a process of ridiculous affirmation resulting in negation where, by calling her a 'memsahib', he wants to assert that she is not really one, and states his disgust at her efforts to behave like one. The novel is replete with incidents like this. In fact, his daughters, who are more hybridized and anglicized individuals, serve as embodiments of his failure to protect his cultural legacy in the face of a cultural onslaught and, in a sense, form the crest of his identity crisis.

Nazneen, on the other hand, though tremendously nostalgic herself, is less resistive of the dominant culture and hence, more open to the process of hybridization than Chanu. She grows from a young, starry-eyed, uneducated woman from rural Bangladesh who believes in fatalism, into a mature, practical and independent woman, ready to face the challenges of life with a quiet but assured self-confidence. The narrative technique as well as style perfectly reflect this development of her character. Her nostalgia, as has already been mentioned, has been ably portrayed through the technique of cinematic flashbacks. This technique also proves vital in the inter-twinning and conjoining of the past with the present, an essential characteristic of a diasporic existence. Her active wish to assimilate is manifested in her willingness to learn to operate a computer and learning how to ice-skate from a television program. She is also interested in improving her linguistic capabilities and defies Chanu by speaking with her daughters in English when he is not at home. We are told that when she first came to England as a girl of eighteen to get married to the forty-year old Chanu Ahmed, she apparently knew only two words in English-‘sorry’ and ‘thank you’. However, through the course of the novel, by dint of her acute inquisitiveness and quiet diligence, she achieves an admirable confidence and comfort in the acquired language. In this regard, she acts as a foil to Chanu, presenting two opposite yet authentic voices towards the problem of diasporic identity crisis. The narrative style employed by Ali is, in a way, symbolic of the evolution of Nazneen’s character. In the earlier parts of the novel, the language is simple and lacks any certain sense of flow. In the first chapter, immediately after she moves to the Tower Hamlets, the descriptions provided are representative of this, as we are told:

Nazneen waved at the tattoo lady. The tattoo lady was always there when Nazneen looked out across the dead grass and broken paving stones to the block opposite. Most of the flats that closed three sides of a square had net curtains and the life behind was all shapes and shadows. But the tattoo lady had no curtains at all. Morning and afternoon she sat with her big thighs spilling over the sides of her chair, tipping forward to drop ash in a bowl, tipping back to slug from her can. She drank now, and tossed the can out of the window. (Ali 17)

The narrative smacks of a culturally shocked yet acutely curious mind, trapped in a foreign locale yet having a sense of wonder about the surroundings. The language employed is reflective of this as it is repeatedly hindered, yet somehow, it remains coordinated, just like Nazneen in her diasporic nascency. But, as the novel moves forward, the narrative grows from strength to strength and the tonal grandeur and linguistic glitter increases manifolds in keeping with the development of the character and personality of Nazneen. In the last chapter of the novel, we find an independent Nazneen, ably taking care of herself and her daughters both economically and otherwise, starting to dance to a rock song called ‘You know you make me wanna shout’. Ali narrates it beautifully as she says:

Nazneen moved her head to the song. Her hips went side to side. She tapped her right foot, then the other. She raised her arms and moved her chest. The music broke in waves over her entire body

She waved her arms, threw back her head and danced around the table. *Shout!* She sang along, filling her lungs from the bottom, letting it all go loose, feeling her hair shake out down her neck and around her shoulders, abandoning her feet to the rhythm, threading her hips through the air. She swooped down and tucked her sari up into the band of her underskirt. *Shout!*

Nazneen put her hands on her waist and kicked her legs high. She turned and kicked, turned and kicked, jumped and kicked and her foot went over her head. (Ali 489)

This is the ultimate transformation of Nazneen as she turns from a shy, unsure and dependent immigrant woman to a confident, independent individual, firmly in control of her destiny as well as her physicality, by being free from both. In her narrative felicity, Ali is like a master musician playing on the harp of Nazneen's body, emancipating each part at a time as a musician plays each note of a symphony. The last scene of the novel shows Nazneen getting ready to ice-skate in a sari; a resounding symbolism of a highly hybridized individual, almost on the brink of finding a successful escape from the 'in-between-ness' of diasporic existence, creating an identity unique to herself. The novel comes full circle and the narrative and the experiences of Nazneen become interchangeable as they fuse in a striking imagery.

In the introduction to *Nation and Narration* (1990), Homi K. Bhabha says, "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye." (N&N Bhabha 1) This stands proved in *Brick Lane*, for through the course of the novel, the origins of Nazneen get dissolved in the sheer intensity of her experiences and all that is left in the mind's eye of the reader, is the image of Nazneen getting ready to ice-skate in a sari. This is Monica Ali's greatest achievement in *Brick Lane* and the high-water mark of her narrative art.

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