

The Creative Launcher

Journal Home URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com>

ISSN: **2455-6580**

Issue: Vol. 7 & Issue 2, (April, 2022)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on: 30 April 2022

Peer Reviewed & Open Access: Yes

Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.53032/issn.2455-6580>

©The Creative Launcher (2022). This Open Access article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>, which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For citation use the DOI. For commercial re-use, please contact editor on: thecreativelauncher@gmail.com



Licensing:  <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Article History: Complete article received: 2 April 2022 | Revised article received: 6 April 2022 | Accepted: 17 April 2022 | First Published: 30 April 2022

∞: Research Article

Encountering The ‘Other’: Diasporic Consciousness in *Jasmine* and *Brick Lane*

Dr. Sangeeta Kotwal

Associate Professor

Department of English

Navyug Kanya Mahavidyalaya,

Affiliated to University of Lucknow, Lucknow, U.P., India

Email: drsangeetakumar@gmail.com

ORCID Id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5740-6894>

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2022.7.2.13>

Pages: 102-107

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee and Monica Ali are both diasporic writers, from India and Bangladesh, respectively. Although Mukherjee’s growing up years were spent in India, it was her experience an immigrant in Canada, where she spent almost fourteen years of her life from 1966 to 1980, which provided her with the themes of her novels. The racism she encountered in Canada forced her to focus on issues such as cultural conflict, alienation, and gender

discrimination, even gender violence. Her novel *Jasmine* encapsulates the experience of an Indian female immigrant to the US who despite various odds and hurdles, is able to survive and prevail. Monica Ali, a Dhaka born British writer, takes up gender problems as well as the issues of migrant community of Bangladesh and was hailed as the best of 'young British novelists' in 2003 for her debut novel *Brick Lane*. The novel explores the life of Nazneen, an immigrant in London, who becomes an embodiment of cultural conflict between east and west. The paper aims to bring out the fact that both women protagonists, Nazneen and Jasmine, as immigrants, adapt and survive due to the status of being the 'other,' which has been accorded to them since birth. Gender discrimination, which is a part of their life, turns them into fighters and survivors. The 'otherness' of their status, helps them acclimatise, while highlighting the commonality of their experience in terms of both, as females and immigrants.

Keywords: Diaspora, Gender, Immigration, Survivor, Commonality, Alienation, Cultural conflict, Racism

"Man is the subject, the absolute, woman is the other" (16), says Simone de Beauvoir. The 'other' status projects dependency, subjugation, lack of Identity and multiple ways in which a woman becomes subservient, a position more or less experienced by an immigrant in a foreign land. This is the reason that diasporic writers inadvertently talk about various socio-cultural issues such as rootlessness, search for home or stability and a sense of loss for the values and culture of the homeland. In the words of Neena Gupta Vij "The diaspora is one group that is defined by its "otherness," exclusion and in-betweenness, that exhibits the xenophobic tendency of conservative societies" (1).

When we look at the female protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, we realise that the status of being in exile is not new for them, as being women in a patriarchal set up, they become exiles as soon as they are born. The loss of so-called home and security already becomes a part of their existence. Rootlessness and identity crisis are the issues which a female invariably faces in her life. Seen in this context, as immigrants, these women are better equipped to deal with the status of 'other' as a second-class citizen, which the mainstream society imposes on them.

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian American novelist, has received critical acclaim for presenting immigrant sensibility in her novels. Her own struggle with identity, first as an immigrant from India to Canada and then to the US, has made her particularly sensitive to the travails of immigrants. Her affinity with them becomes clearly visible in her novels. *Jasmine* highlights the journey of a female protagonist who starts as Jyoti and ends up as Jane, shedding her inhibitions and societal expectations during this arduous though exhilarating journey.

Monica Ali on the other hand is a Bangladeshi writer born in Dhaka and brought up in England since the age of three. Her debut novel *Brick Lane* deals with the complexity of immigrant experience- ethnic, racial as well as political. Despite it leaving controversy in its wake, Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* transcends the boundaries of gender constraints while

taking up various religious and political issues, which trouble the immigrant community of her country.

Both Bharati Mukherjee and Monica Ali besides taking up gender issues also talk about immigrant issues, which being diasporic female writers, are close to their heart. As women, and as diasporic writers, they question “identity and belonging” (26). According to Neena Gupta Vij, “The concepts of root, home, nostalgia, memory, immigration, hybrid identity are interlinked with the diasporic phenomena” (26). Nazneen and Jasmine, the female protagonists of *Brick Lane* and *Jasmine* respectively, encounter racialism in various forms. “Non-white women in the Euro-Centric consciousness have always been the Other” (Begum, 205). The stigma of being the ‘other’ in a foreign land both in terms of gender and culture make these female protagonists strike out in search of independence and security. Fortunately, both have the spirit and courage of their creators. Surviving, fighting, making seemingly impossible decisions on their own and resisting forces of evil, both Jasmine and Nazneen absorb the culture of a new land while trying to retain their own.

Brick Lane focuses on the story of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi immigrant who marries a man twenty years older and moves to Britain to live the life of an immigrant. Nazneen’s life is shaped by the philosophy “what could not be changed, must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne” (6). The simple life of the village combined with a patriarchal setup makes her “an unspoiled girl” (14) appreciated by her husband as she is a “good worker” (14). Confined within the boundaries of a small apartment in the east end of London, Nazneen is totally dependent on her husband, Chanu, because she speaks no English except ‘thank you’ and ‘sorry’ and is not allowed to go out. Gender differences manifest themselves when men and women are accorded different social status. “One is placed in the core and the other in the periphery. The one occupying the periphery, by virtue of the metaphorical space it occupies, is marginalised, silenced, and made invisible” (Moitra, 8).

The fact of being marginalised and rendered insignificant mocks Nazneen as she overhears her husband commenting upon her that “a blind uncle is better than no uncle” (14). The only respite comes when she is watching ice-skating on TV. It is then that she gets an inkling of her aspirations and dreams and craves the kind of freedom that the dancers enjoy. It becomes a motif for her struggle for independence from gender as well as cultural constraints. It was as if “the old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white light glory” (34).

Mukherjee's *Jasmine* develops the story of Jasmine, a young illegal migrant to the American shores, who is living in with her crippled lover Bud Ripplemeyer. Apart from the events relating to her life in Iowa, she also narrates the events that span the distance between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life. Born in Hasnapur, Punjab, named Jyoti, she turns out to be sharp, intelligent, and attractive, a ‘waste’, “as daughters are considered to be curses” (39) and “Dowries beggar families for generations” (39). Jyoti born as a fifth girl in the family has strangulation marks on her throat as a new born which she believes were there because her mother “wanted to spare her... the pain of a dowry-less bride” (40). She learns early in her life that brains are wasted on a girl and the mother is punished for past sins if she gives birth to

daughters. The commonality of this kind of experience in eastern societies is confirmed when Nazneen, as an infant, is ignored and left by her mother to fight with her fate in her Bangladeshi village. “It is the mother who instils in the girl child a sense of her difference.... the mother repeats and replays the various little feminine dramas that had informed her own childhood and adolescence in her daughter’s life...” (Geetha 126).

Moving from the feudal society of Hasnapur to the city of Jalandhar is a complete dislocation for Jyoti. Prakash, her idealistic husband, transforms Jyoti into Jasmine, telling her “You are Jasmine now, you cannot jump into wells” (92). Jasmine gets a culture shock when she is asked to call Prakash by his name. In her village “wives used only pronouns to address their husbands” (77). For both Nazneen and Jasmine the process of exile begins from birth itself and culminates into their exile from the country of their origin. For Nazneen the move to London means a confinement, and adjustment in an alien culture and also a life bereft of natural beauty and open spaces. She has to endure dictates of people like Mrs. Islam and her own pompous and ultra-conservative husband, Chanu. Her friendship with Razia, despite the objections of her husband, and her clandestine manner of sending money to help Hasina, her sister in Dhaka, significantly reflect her strong bonding with these women, and give her the impetus to assert herself and gain financial independence. Reflecting on female relationships, V. Geetha points out that women who had the “courage and energy [are] inspired by new found solidarities that were forged between women...” (117).

Mukherji’s *Jasmine*, on the other hand, learns a lesson of survival during her agonising trip to US, as an illegal immigrant. She has to survive weeks of “sleepless half-starved passage, the numbed surrender to various men for the reward of an orange, a blanket, a slice of cheese (121). The culmination of this brutal journey comes in the form of rape by Half face, the captain of the ship, bringing illegal migrants to America. As an immigrant in America, Jasmine learns her first lesson that gender violence prevails everywhere. Killing Half face like Kali she sheds her Indian identity and moves further with the intention of starting a new life. Jasmine is transformed into Jazzy by Lillian Gordon, the social worker, and for the first-time wears “t-shirt, tight-chords and running shoes” (133) walking like “one of those Trinidad Indian girls, all thrust and cheekiness” (133). Adapting and assimilating, Jasmine fits into various roles and is inspired by “the fluidity of American character and American Landscape” (138).

In multiple ways, Jasmine experiences the excitement and despair arising from adapting to a culture, which completely contradicts her upbringing, making her realise her ‘otherness.’ Her five months stay in Flushing at professor Vadhera’s home, finally makes her comprehend that she has come far from her identity as Jyoti and does not want to return. The subservient, conservative, and meek girl flowers into a mature decision maker, a survivor, and a non-conformist, who sometimes feels “like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold unable to slow... yet unwilling to abandon the ride” (139).

A similar situation occurs in *Brick Lane* when Nazneen visits Dr. Azad’s home. In response to Chanu’s lamentations on loss of culture and identity and the need to preserve them, the westernised Mrs. Azad rebukes him. Commenting on the rigidity of female immigrants, she points out that:

Some women spend ten, twenty years here... and learn only two words of English... They go around covered from head to toe in their little walking prisons and when someone calls to them in the street, they are upset... Everything should change for them. They do not have to change one thing. (116)

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* touches the issues which highlight gender constraints in the backdrop of riots, political movement, and the angst of the immigrant community. Nazneen's growing attraction towards Kareem highlights the tension and unrest in the family as well as society. Her extramarital affair with Kareem is the manifestation of her desire to be with a man of her choice, who recognises her as a woman rather than 'a good worker.' But her silent admiration for Kareem gradually recedes when instead of a soul mate he turns out to be simply, a dominant fanatic, whose ultimate goal in life is to establish a glorious Islamic kingdom. Interestingly Monica Ali seems to point out that in a culture which allows women to grow, traditional marriages may not only be threatened but fail miserably. As Nazneen starts earning, the power of decision making subtly shifts and it is she, and not her husband, who decides the family's future, as she sticks to her decision of staying back in London with her daughters. While her marriage disintegrates, she matures as a woman, honed by experience, and a need for asserting her own individuality, to give a proper home to her children in the country of her choice and not of birth. Finally, she understands that "Home is the place where one is accepted..." (Jagpal, 35) and also that "sometimes we carry our home within us" (Jagpal, 35).

In *Jasmine*, the moment of decision arrives for Jasmine when as Jane she is caught between "the promise of America and old-world dutifulness" (240). Her experience in the home of Taylor and Wylie as the care giver to their daughter Duff, makes her aware of the truly democratic setup of the country where class distinction is blurred, and a maid can be treated as a sister or a friend. Her choosing Taylor over Bud is a step which defines her as a woman who celebrates her freedom and overcomes the 'otherness' of her gender as well as culture.

The heroines of both Mukherji and Ali survive, adapt, and fight with the concept of being the 'other' in a society where either they can be alienated for ever or become an intrinsic part of it. The fact that they choose to ameliorate rather than disintegrate and decide to metamorphose themselves completely to celebrate their status as 'other,' reflects over the stand their creators take as members of immigrant societies in Britain and the US, respectively.

Works Cited

Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. Scribner, 2003

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 1997

Begum, Jameela. "Mapping the 'Invisible' Terrains of Female Experience: Women of Colour in Canadian Literature" *Articulating Gender*, edited by Anjali Bhelade and Mala Pandurang. Pencraft International, 2000.

Geetha V. *Gender*, Stree, 2002

Jacob, Asha Susan. "Kamla Mahandaya's Indian Women Protagonists." *Post- Independence Indian English Fiction*, edited by Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Alessandro Monti, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001.

- Jagpal, Anju. "Where is "Home": A Study of Taslima Nasreen's *Homecoming* Asif Currimbhoy's *The Refugee*." *Contemporary Women's Writing in India*, edited by Varun Gulati and Mythili Anoop. Lexington Books, 2014.
- Mandal, Somdatta (ed.) Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives. Pencraft Books, 2010.
- Moitra, Shefali. *Feminist Thought: Androcentrism, Communication and Objectivity*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 2002.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. Jasmine. Virajo Press, 1991
- Vij, Neena Gupta. "Introduction: Defining Diaspora." *Diasporic Writings: Narratives Across Space and Time*, edited by Neena Gupta Vij and Raj Gaurav Verma. Value Publications, 2020.
- "Diasporic Writings: Themes and Concerns." *Diasporic Writings: Narratives Across Space and Time*, edited by Neena Gupta Vij and Raj Gaurav Verma. Value Publications, 2020.