Assignment no. 16: Discuss the fictional presentation and exploration of the issue of identity in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*
This is England

- On Narrativity, Identity and Stereotypes in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane

Monica Ali explores issues of identity with Bangladeshi-immigrant protagonist Nazneen in her 2003 book Brick Lane. Reactions on the novel created accusations of stereotyping the populace of London’s Tower Hamlets, where the story for the chief part is set. Using mainly Stuart Hall’s article “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” and Homi Bhaba’s “The Other Question. Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism”, I will comment upon these two topics while at the same time delineating some of Ali’s fictional representation through the narrative.¹

The novel opens by the intertext “Mymensingh District, East Pakistan, 1967”, prior to beginning thus: “An hour and forty-five minutes before Nazneen’s life began – began as it would proceed for quite some time, that is to say uncertainly – her mother Rubpan felt an iron fist squeeze her belly” (Ali 2003:7). This is four years before East Pakistan became independent and consequently changed name to Bangladesh, and here we are presented to our protagonist viewed through the eyes of a third person narrator who from the outlook lays her narrative ‘sympathy’ or perspective very near to that of Nazneen’s. At the age of eighteen she is married to Chanu, a forty year old Bengali living in London, as the text jumps to “Tower Hamlets, London, 1985”; “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” (ibid 12). As beginnings go, these two do not reveal much of the consequent action without hinting at certain aspects of it. Nazneen’s life’s ‘uncertainty’ takes its que from her mother’s and – later on – her own complete faith in fate (both the predestined- and the divine kind) to make the best ‘choice’ possible for her. The dreariness – dead grass and broken

¹ Since this is only going to be a qualification essay, this short paper should be considered an outline for a bigger one, and therefore many of my arguments will not be drawn out to its full and final consequence.
pavement of Tower Hamlets, contrasts that of her Bangladeshi village, and the tattooed lady
starts to signify (and to some extent mirror) the possibility/impossibility of a meaningful and
unique life for Nazneen:

“If she put her ear to the wall she could hear sounds. The television on. Coughing. Sometimes the
lavatory flushing. Someone upstairs scraping a chair. A shouting match below. Everyone in their
boxes, counting their possessions. In all her eighteen years, she could scarcely remember a
moment she had spent alone. Until she married. And came to London to sit day after day in this
large box with the furniture to dust, and the muffled sound of private lives sealed away above,
below and around her” (ibid 18).

Ali fictionally represents the change of geographic and human scenery, but also mental
landscape, between the earlier rustic empire and its dislocated post-industrial centre. As a
non-typical postcolonial text, Ali distinguishes and subverts the old opposition between
‘western’ and ‘eastern’ values, and – perhaps because the Dhaka-born author ‘speaks’ from
within the empire’s centre; talking its ‘language’, as it were – one get the feeling she is all the
more critical of the Bengali Diaspora’s mentality: “They don’t ever really leave home. Their
bodies are here but their hearts are back there. And anyway, look how they live: just
recreating villages here” (ibid 24).

The letters Nazneen receives from her sister Hasina creates a complementary set of
values (her only true root to Bangladesh) opposed to that of the British society and Chanu.
The most important of these is the arranged-marriage vs. the love-marriage, which is a
recurring theme in the novel – and stands to explain Nazneen’s affair with Karim. The binary
structure or dichotomy for Nazneen is not between a postcolonial situation and Diasporas in
voluntary exile, but between a pre-colonial situation, so to speak (her adolescence in an
untouched small country village), and a Sylheti community in the estranging colossus of the
West: England. Between the apparently familiar, but first and foremost different. However,
when Nazneen first came to London, all she ever wanted was to go back. But her position
changes when Chanu, in the face of total failure, eventually plans to return – in the most
Diasporic spirit – with the whole family, and all Nazneen now want is to stay. She realises
what Chanu doesn’t, that his wish to come ‘home’ is only about running away from what has
become their home. Their “belongingness to it constitutes what Benedict Anderson calls ‘an imagined community’”, and their transitional life in London makes it impossible for them to “literally go home again” (Hall 1996:117). Furthermore, Chanu’s subtle rant towards Karim when he unexpectedly walks in on Nazneen playing domesticity with her lover (as the picture on the front of this paper might illustrate), may be seen as a comment on Nazneen’s fatalism and analogous to the postcolonial problem of the Diasporas:

“When I was a young man like you (…) I wanted to be a British civil servant (…) a High Flyer, Top Earner, Head of Department, Permanent Secretary, Cabinet Secretary, Right-hand Bloody Man of the Bloody Prime Minister. (…) Anything is possible so everything I wanted was possible,’ Chanu went on. ‘But what about all the other possibilities? The ones we never see when we are young, but are there all along. One day you wake up and say to yourself, I didn’t choose this. And then you spend a long time thinking, but did I?’ (Ali 2003:310).

Identity, not to speak of colonial identity, is according to Stuart Hall nothing more than a construct. Cultural identity bases itself on a historic substance but ultimately rests on a chosen position: “we should think (…) of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall 1996:110)

Here one might argue that Ali constructs and represents no such identity for the reader of her novel. If nothing else, she problematizes the possibility of identity in a postcolonial society – a reality which affects everyone “at the moment when European culture (…) had been dislocated, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself the culture of reference, as Derrida puts it (2001:282). It is on the other hand for the characters of Ali’s novel that the construct of identity plays a major role. In the meeting of Tower Hamlet’s Sylheti Diasporic community, Nazneen meets some elements that she can identify herself with – food, clothes, language (to a particular extent), all part of a superficial cultural heritage – but very much that is different: racism (sure, the British in the novel seemingly only ignores the Sylheti community, but ignorance is only a passive form of discrimination), family structures breaking down, language (to a general extent), the clash of cultures (with every expectation that follows), and so forth. It is in this transitional space, and the constant wish for return, that Nazneen and Chanu must ‘create’ their identity. Hall argues that “Difference (…) persists – in
and alongside continuity”, and Nazneen rightfully foresees Chanu’s wanton of return as yet another failure, for “To return to [ones ‘home’ country] after a long absence is to experience again the shock of the ‘doubleness’ of similarity and difference” (Hall 1996:114).

Additionally, Hall points out for the Diaspora (in general), that this “preoccupation with movement and migration (…) is destined to cross the narrative of [any postcolonial text]” (ibid 119). As it is, Nazneen’s transformation – her changing position – illustrates her understanding of Fanon’s concept of a national culture as “the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” anywhere those people may be situated (Fanon quoted in Hall 1996:121).

In the book the Muslims of Tower Hamlets ‘identify’ themselves with their agonizing ‘brothers’ in the Middle-east following the incident of 9/11 – both in the sense of Hall’s collective/continuity and difference – when the western society’s scepticism against Muslims increase. As a piece of fiction, it is striking, however, that the real Muslims (in other words, old men and Imams of the Sylhet) did not like to recognise or identify themselves with the fictitious characters in the novel. Perhaps especially because they, even more strikingly, see themselves as being stereotyped – in Homi Bhaba’s sense – by a postcolonial writer, no less: “the stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive, and demands not only that we extend our critical and political objectives but that we change the object of analysis itself”, Bhaba asserts, and further, as a limited form of otherness, “The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality” (1994: 70, 78, 75, emphasis added).

But the question remains: How can one make these accusations towards a Bangladeshi-born immigrant turned British author? Wouldn’t her heritage nullify such indictments? The reactions to Brick Lane took a turn for the worse when the adaptation was going to use scenes
from the area where the book is set. The campaign against the film (which nevertheless was made, and did only fair in the box offices) was allegedly backed by novelist Germaine Greer, who found Ali’s description of the Tower Hamlets’ Bangladeshi and Sylheti community insulting. To the Guardian she said:

“All Ali did not concern herself with the possibility that her plot might seem outlandish to the people who created the particular culture of Brick Lane (...). As British people know little and care less about the Bangladeshi people in their midst, their first appearance as characters in an English novel had the force of a defining caricature” (Lewis 2006)

Moreover, the Guardian relates that Greer thought Ali “in giving her novel such a familiar and specific name (...) was able to build a marvellously creative elaboration on a pre-existing stereotype” (ibid):

“English readers were charmed by her Bengali characters,” she continued, “But some of the Sylhetis of Brick Lane did not recognise themselves. Bengali Muslims smart under an Islamic prejudice that they are irreligious and disorderly, the impure among the pure, and here was a proto-Bengali writer with a Muslim name, portraying them as all of that and more. For people who don't have much else, self-esteem is crucial” (ibid).

In a comment related to the twenty-year heritage of Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses, Ali asserts a few points that could be read as a reflection on Greer’s accusations. She outlines how patronizing the western liberal idea of respect is. To think that one self (in this case, the western liberal society) as a majority should be able to handle political and cultural criticism, while at the same time treating minorities as far too sensitive and protecting them against the same criticism indicates hypocrisy: an idealistic err bordering on moral supremacy, and, at worst, that form of cultural relativism that again becomes ethnocentric. The end result, Ali thinks, is that one gives too much consideration to those who shouts loudest and angriest within these minorities, and subsequently ignores the diversity these groups represent (Orre, 2009).

Certainly stereotypical racial discourse, as Homi Bhaba asserts, “provides a colonial ‘identity’ that is played out – like all fantasies of originality and origination – in the face and space of the disruption and threat from the heterogeneity of other positions” (1994:77) – but anyone
who has read Ali’s book can see that she goes beyond this stereotype, this discourse and identity segmentation to point towards a better possibility; a more open and fulfilling multiculturalist society where, as Nazneen’s friend Razia says, you can do whatever you like, identify with whatever you like. Her novel seem more fruitful than only to suggest that the real home somehow is lost; as, Stuart Hall contends, “is the secret code which every Western text was ‘re-read’” (Hall 1996:116). Ali, on the other hand, in an attempt not to blow her novel out of proportions, has found the code in which the Western text is ‘re-written’: with humour, satire, criticism, and blunt honesty. One can blame her for being biased (she a woman, and all), but one cannot accuse her for not being truthful. Point in case: Razia’s husband is saving money and sending them to Dhaka to pay for bricks for a mosque instead of caring for his family. He dies by falling under a pile of oh-not-so-holy cow carcasses. Talk about irony.

Sources


