

Immigration, Integration, Dislocation: the Herculean Labours of the Self in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

Brick Lane offers the reader a fascinating insight into the universe of the British Bengali community in London, foregrounding a panoply of human experiences, from the trials and tribulation of the immigrants to the emancipation of the female protagonist. This paper investigates the nature of the multicultural conflict that the novel foregrounds, revealing the fact that the immigrant is a disembedded self, torn between the desire to preserve his cultural heritage and the need to adapt in order to survive in the great metropolis of London. As the novel chronicles the protagonist's transformation from a shy girl into an independent woman who takes charge of her life, I shall also explore the fashioning of the feminine self and look into matters such as dependence, social roles, forms of femininity.

Keywords: multicultural conflict, immigrants, disembedded self, cultural heritage, forms of femininity

1. Brick Lane - assimilation, adaptation or resistance?

Brick Lane and the lives of some of its dwellers are the focus of attention of this novel that recaptures all the drama and intensity of living in a foreign country. It is a place imbued with the smell of food, a bit derelict and where people cling to a fragile sense of community that can shield them from the realities of a society where they struggle to integrate. Although we only see Brick Lane through Nazneen's point of view, we get a deep insight into what it means to be an immigrant from the detailed and vivid descriptions of the neighborhood and the lives of some of its inhabitants.

The dwellers of Brick Lane struggle to recreate their ancestral culture in the UK, at the same time trying to reconnect with the place of origin. This in turn, enables them to maintain their identity as Muslims. All over the place there is a smell of curry, traditional clothing is somewhat maintained and those who breach the rules are shunned. As Gill Valentine

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maintains, they are ways of mobilizing a sense of community and through these performative acts and practices of the self, the immigrants “express a common or shared identity with others and caring human relations” (1999: 54-55).

When Nazneen first comes to the UK, her neighbors come and visit her, offering her advice. Chanu warns her not to associate with people who are not of the respectable type, such as those who are poor and illiterate or who do not respect their traditions. In the whole novel, the characters only associate with other residents and they even have a Muslim doctor whom they ask for help. This kind of seclusion seems reassuring as contact with the white people proves disappointing, from what Chanu reports. Zygmunt Bauman contends that the frantic search “for safety-in-community” is generated by existential uncertainty (2001: 118). When talking about “voluntary ghettos”, Bauman underlines the fact that their essential characteristic is “*homogeneity* of those inside contrasted with the *heterogeneity* of the outside” (2001: 116). What distinguishes them from the real ghettos is its prime purpose: “to bar outsiders from going in - the insiders are free to go out at will” (ibid. 117).

This could account for the state of disarray in which Brick Lane is portrayed: thin walls through which you could hear your neighbors’ every move, peeling paint on the doors, bad smells. As Razia comments, they had problems with the heating but the council did not do anything to fix it. Chanu strives to gather support in order to bring a mobile library in Brick Lane. Dr. Azad deplors the lack of clinics and specialists to help those who struggle with drug addiction.

Over the years, Brick Lane undergoes many changes as regards the appearance of the buildings and the behavior of the residents. Nazneen, a keen observer of these realities, often reflects on these changes as she looks on the window, an activity which in her first months London constituted her only palpable connection to the world:

There were faces she did not recognize. They got out of their cars and approached other cars. They formed in fours and fives and got back in their cars. They carried an air of violence with them, like a sort of breeding, good or bad, without ever displaying it (Ali, 2004: 200).

The teenagers and often children display anti-social behavior due to a lack of prospects, poverty and an atmosphere charged with impotence, abandonment. Violence seems to be positively valorized as it constitutes for

them a way of mitigating the helplessness and asserting their rights to a better life. The characters have their agency diminished by their socioeconomic status and the discrimination they face and some compensate by illegitimate ways. The novel exposes the dangers of being lured by the Western temptations. Tariq, Razia's son, becomes a drug addict and starts stealing and selling furniture from the house. Geoff Dench, in his study of diasporas in the UK, notices the fact that:

Many people in Britain . . . do regard ethnic minorities as outsiders whose destinies and loyalties are self-evidently divergent from those of British people, and whose dependent and inferior standing in Britain goes without saying. Wherever a conflict of interests arises it is axiomatic that public sympathy should be against them (qtd. in Bauman 103).

The residents of Brick Lane are indeed empowered by the sense of belongingness that they derive from living in a tight community such as this which somewhat helps mitigate the sense of estrangement and ostracism. Indeed, when she goes out of Brick Lane, Nazneen feels real terror on finding herself on unknown territory: "She, like Hasina, could not simply go home. They were both lost in cities that would not pause even to shrug. Poor Hasina. Nazneen wept but as the tears started to come she knew that she was weeping more for her own stupidity than for her sister" (Ali, 2004: 37).

Nazneen finds it hard to move around in an unfamiliar place. She is appalled to find out that the English did not look twice at her and felt peculiar, "invisible". Bengali men, on the other hand, would make up things about her if they saw her in a shop and when a woman got that kind of reputation, she could not undo it. Therefore, there is a constant fear of being talked about, of becoming disreputable, because that would mean social death.

Mrs. Islam believes that the white people are individualistic and do not like to get involved in other people's lives, while they help each other in times of need. She offers to take care of Nazneen's baby so that she can manage the chores. Razia exposes this benevolence as mere hypocrisy. She reveals that Mrs. Islam is a moneylender and that she and her sons had threatened to break Amina's arm if she does not make the next payment.

Bauman argues that the propensity to communal enclosure is brought about and endorsed in both directions:

“The proximity of ethnic strangers triggers ethnic instincts in the locals, and the strategies that follow such instincts are aimed at the separation and ghettoization of alien elements, which in turn reverberate in the impulse to self-estrangement and self-enclosure of the forcefully ghettoized group” (2001: 103).

This could explain why the “war of leaflets” starts and goes on for a long period. When racist leaflets start to appear under the doors of the residents old Brick Lane, some of them form a group called Bengali Tigers and hold elections for a Questioner, Secretary and Spiritual Leader. According to their mission statement, Bengali Tigers seek to protect Muslim right and culture. Some of the lads from the meeting call out for immediate action by violent means such as burning their offices. Karim tells them that their opponents are getting more sophisticated. They do not simply refer to race, “they say *culture, religion*”. In this respect, Michael Cronin asserts that “immigrant groups can now be attacked not because they are ‘racially’ inferior but because they are ‘culturally’ different” (2006: 48).

Disenfranchised and humiliated, the Bengal Tigers are riven with a keen sense of injustice and see violence as the only way of undoing it. As Bauman notes:

The more the immigrants feel that their original cultural lore is respected in their new home, and the less they feel that because of their different identity they are resented, pushed out, threatened or discriminated against – the more willingly they open up to the cultural offerings of the new country and the less convulsively they hold on to their own separate ways (2001: 141).

In this case, nevertheless, the Bengal Tigers do not feel that their community is valued or respected. Shahana finds a leaflet titled Multicultural Murder that claims that in the local schools “Christianity is being gently slaughtered” (Ali, 2004: 102-3) and the Muslim extremists intend to transform Britain into an Islamic Republic.

Chanu is displeased with the fact that the English do not distinguish between their country and Africa and that all immigrants are considered “poor peasants” even if they have a degree. The leaflet points out the cultural difference and a common misconception- immigrants are taking over our country. The backlash against the residents of Brick Lane is

legitimized by their being considered “the other” which is threatening. Cronin’s observations seem particularly illuminating in this sense:

Thus, the response to the transnational neo-liberal assault on the public provision of goods and services translates into a particularist welfare nationalism that uses cultural difference to identify migrants as the putative cause of social and economic dislocation and fragmentation.
(2006: 50)

Finding a common enemy whom they blame for all their penury and isolation, the Bengal Tigers gather ever more support for their cause. They are convinced that the time to fight back had come.

Even women come and take part in their gatherings, as this is their opportunity to voice their concerns.

Social identity is embedded in group membership. The Bengal Tigers internalise the group’s values and act in accordance with them. The interaction between individual idiosyncrasies and societal factors can be surveyed from the point of view of the concept of person-based social identity, as advanced by social identity theory. It refers to the way “group properties are internalized by individual members as part of their self-concept” (Hogg, 2012: 504). In this sense, it is essential to point out that groups “furnish us with an identity, a way of locating ourselves in relation to other people” (Hogg, 2012: 502). The Bengali Tigers define themselves in terms of the groups they belong to, Bengali Muslims and residents of Brick Lane. By identifying with these two defining characteristics, they have their sense of autonomy restored and a feeling that they can act in order to counteract the discrimination they face.

Consequently, being a member of these groups impacts on their worldview and the way they experience the universe but also the ways in which local authorities and the Lion Hearts deal with them. The leaders of the Bengali Tigers see the world through bellicose lens and assert that their existence is a matter of continuous strife.

After 9/11, the Muslims face a backlash and Karim calls off the festival, *mela*, that the Bengal Tigers had started to organize. The leafleting campaigns culminates in a March against the Mullahs. The Bengal Tigers plan a counterattack, a demo. The police close the street during the demo. No Lion Hearts show up so there is no direct confrontation between the two groups. The boys fight between themselves. A group of boys set a police car on fire. Missiles are thrown on the road. After the demo, there is

huge press coverage and politicians came to Brick Lane. One councillor asked Nazneen if she found it difficult to cope with the living standards and looked disappointed when she said she only had two children. Nevertheless, as Nazneen confesses, no major changes came over Brick Lane. Some dealers were arrested and old wounds began to heal.

1.1 *The trauma of exile: Chanu*

Chanu poignantly illustrates the ways in which subjectivity is shaped by the cultural conflict. After some years spent alone in London, he marries a younger girl from Bangladesh, whom he never met before and takes her to London. A simple girl from the village, as he tells a friend, is what he needed in order to complete his dream of replicating his home country in the big metropolis. Chanu is paradoxically both proud and ashamed of his fellow countrymen. He teaches Nazneen and his girls about the great past of Bangladesh, so he is proud of something distant and unattainable while feeling contempt for those who, in his opinion, do not achieve success in their new country. He had been an ambitious man, planning to become Private Secretary to the Prime Minister. After obtaining a degree at the University of Dhaka, he moves to London where he gets a job at the local council. An idealistic young man, his dreams will be crushed one by one because he firmly believes that the English did not think that he, an educated man, was better than other illiterate immigrants.

Consequently, Chanu internalises the disregard he feels they were treated with and, as a result, bitter indignation becomes an integral part of his selfhood. As Caroline Garland contends:

Our sense of identity is derived from identifications with different aspects of our objects. We discover ourselves through the images that we perceive in the eyes and looks of others, seeing ourselves in others and finding ourselves in the process. We learn to relate to others through a complex process of identifications and dis-identifications, developing a capacity to move between one's own point of view and those of others (1998: 140).

Chanu's identity is moulded by interpersonal relations and the groups he is willingly or not part of. In addition to this, pertaining to an underprivileged group which is stigmatized, is a factor in the creation of identity. As Chanu confesses, life for an immigrant is a tragedy. Caught between the struggle to integrate and the compulsion to maintain his

identity and heritage, Chanu feels alienated in a society that does not seem to appreciate his education and hard work. He is very frustrated because he is not promoted despite being so industrious and he blames his race for this failure, deciding to quit his job when his colleague Wilkie, who was not as competent and hard-working, is promoted instead of him, a man who could cite from Shakespeare, Chaucer and Dickens. Nevertheless, his maladjustment also stems from his being so self-centered. Blind to his wife's needs and concerns, to his children's being born and bred in England and wanting to live like the British, Chanu reads a lot but seems to understand little and all his life is a series of failed plans. The real tragedy of his life seems to be the failure of communication. He talks to his wife and not with her and never seems interested in eliciting answers from her. He expects his daughters to act the same, passive recipients of information and gets angry when Shahana questions his judgement.

Chanu experiences the trauma of exile in a different way than Nazneen. After years of struggling to make it out in the UK, he expresses his desire to return to Bangladesh, the place where he feels he could be somebody. After a series of failed business plans, he becomes a taxi driver, the classic job reserved for the poor immigrants, forced to deal every day with the "ignorant types":

"You see, all my life I have struggled. And for what? What good has it done? I have finished with 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. "You see, when the English went to our country, they did not go to stay. They went to make money, and the money they made, they took it out of the country. They never left home. Mentally. Just taking money out. And that is what I am doing now. What else can you do?"
(Ali, 2004: 129)

These reproaches, directed at the others, reveal more about him than about the others, as a mechanism of defence, that is projection, seems to be at work². He also fails to adapt because he mentally never left his homeland either. He starts doing what he feared the most- an intellectually stultifying job that slumps him into dejection, draining his initiative and energy. In this sense, we can also explore the way Chanu constructs his

² Laplanche and Pontalis describe this mechanism as being "a matter of throwing out what one refuses either to recognise in oneself or to be oneself" (1988: 354).

identity from the point of view of two concepts namely narcissism and the four needs for meaning.

Richard Sennett argues that narcissism is stirred up “when the focus upon the innate qualities of the self is on potentials for action rather than specific actions accomplished” (1978: 327). Chanu often talks about what he wants to achieve, setting goals for the future, beginning a lot of courses and gathering diplomas that prove useless, instead of focusing on his current job. He consequently becomes absorbed in “unrealized action” (ibid., 327), always stuck with his books at home, which will only increase his discontent. Nazneen begins to notice this process and soon becomes attracted to the more resolute Karim whom “unlike Chanu, he was not mired in words. He did not talk and talk until he was no longer certain of anything” (Ali, 2004: 158).

According to Roy Baumeister, human beings desire meaningful lives and this “can be understood in terms of four main needs for meaning³. These constitute four patterns of motivation that guide how people try to make sense of their lives” (2002: 610). People are driven by an essential need to be effective, that involves being in control of events and of feeling capable and strong (Baumeister, 2011: 66). Work entails a myth of fulfilment, offering unrealistic promises related to durable positive emotions such as dignity and a sense of achievement (ibid., 233). For Chanu, none of his jobs allow him to experience such feelings and that is why his need to be effective is not satisfied, leading to a state of unbridled inadequacy. Having a job is an important part of our social identity. Unable to provide well for his family and being in debt with Mrs. Islam, he is forced to accept his wife taking a job as a seamstress, a powerful blow to his ego as Muslims did not allow their wives to work, as is seen in Razia’s case.

For Chanu and Karim, Nazneen constitutes the embodiment of homeland: nurturing, chaste, bearer of traditions. In fact, she represents the projection of their feminine ideal and they do not take into account her real needs. In fact, she just outwardly conforms to this ideal. As a woman, she was expected to act as a upholder of tradition and to safeguard the cultural identity of their community and to educate their children in the same spirit. By marrying her, Chanu hopes to recreate his place of origin in his country of adoption. As Uma Narayan argues, women of Indian origin are assigned an important role in maintaining Indian identity in England:

³ These four needs are: the need for purpose, for a sense of efficacy, for value and for a basis for self-worth.

While Indian immigrants have “assimilated” into British culture into various ways, the retention of “Indian cultural identity” has often been grounded in an insistence upon arranged marriages to other Indians, especially on the part of daughters. (...) Women become, once again, especially around issues of marriage and procreation, the imaginary site of resistance to incorporation into an “alien” culture. (1997: 175)

When his two daughters are older, he strives to model their understanding in order to continue in his reverie. He educates them in the same spirit, striving to preserve their Bengali identity. If he considers that his wife does not need to learn English or to go out of the house, he also forbids his daughters to speak in English when they are at home or to wear tight jeans. He strives to instill in them love and admiration for the Bengali culture and teaches them about its history and literature. Shahana confesses her mother that she hated him for imposing so many restrictions to them. Torn by two competing needs- to adapt in order to support his family and the mourning for his homeland- Chanu is not saved by the great amount of certificates. Unable to adapt properly to the western norms, which he sees as a threat to his very identity, but neither ready to accept his family's integration, Chanu chooses to leave. The crumbling of his ambitions, one by one, lead to a reconfiguration of his consciousness so as to contain dissonant ideas. He is convinced that by going back home, he and his family will start again and he will be regarded as a successful man then. Unfortunately, his wife and children do not want to come to Bangladesh and he goes alone, trying to start a business in the soap industry in his homeland.

2. Immigration and the uprooted self

Brick Lane is the story of Nazneen, the eighteen years old girl from Bangladesh, who, eager to please her father, does not reject the idea of marrying an older man, Chanu, whom she had never met. After this arranged marriage, they move to London. This is the background of an extraordinary story of emancipation, from a timid young immigrant who only knew two words in English to a woman who takes charge of her life and is able to support her two daughters. The path to independence is an arduous one, taking several years and the change comes as a result of a series of events but also as a consequence of a reframing of her subjectivity

so as to negotiate between her personal identity as a woman and Muslim. In the first few months of her stay in the UK, Nazneen does not leave her flat and just spends her time observing her neighbors. Prisoner of this dreary rut, she misses her people back in Bangladesh, which points to an acute feeling of isolation. The immigrant is a lonely being, whose autonomy is curtailed by the fact that she does not know English and is terrified of going outside. Her existence is marred by a pervading feeling of entrapment in her body and their flat, always longing for her homeland: "They had nothing to do with her. For a couple of beats, she closed her eyes and smelled the jasmine that grew close to the well, heard the chickens scratching in the hot earth, felt the sunlight that warmed her cheeks and made dancing patterns on her eyelids" (Ali, 2004: 47).

The description evokes a claustrophobic atmosphere that contrast with the liberty afforded by living in a village where she could walk freely, enjoying nature and the animals. In this flat, she feels oppressed and she finds even the furniture intimidating, as if it could swallow her, which is symptomatic of her feeling caged and silenced in that marriage, living like in a doll house. Only when she watches ice-skating does she escape from this monotony, admiring the freedom of movement of the female figure skating. Chanu goes shopping and forbids her from going out of the house, at the same time telling her that she is lucky she married an educated, "westernized" man. He also forbids her to attend English classes, arguing that she will be busy caring for the baby.

Nazneen lives caught up between two worlds: the world of everyday chores and motherhood and the world of memories of her childhood where she often takes refuge from an encroaching reality. Haunted by the specter of her dead mother, who had committed suicide, she has a vision with her saying: "If God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men" (ali, 2004: 50). This is the fatalistic attitude that imbues her selfhood, ruled by her mother's decision to "leave her to her fate" and not take her to the hospital. Nazneen survives and her worldview will be influenced by the strong belief that people are helpless in the face of destiny and are therefore at its mercy. When her son Raqib falls ill, she takes him to the hospital. When he dies, she blames herself for having fought against destiny.

When some incident recalls something from her past in Bangladesh, flashbacks overwhelm her. Nevertheless, these memories are often not happy. With a depressed, neurotic mother and a distant father who rushed

to take a second wife after the death of his first one, Nazneen finds joy only when remembering her sister, Hasina, and how they used to roam the village. Writing letters to Hasina becomes an outlet for her piled up frustrations. The immigrant, Vijay Mishra maintains, undergoes the “trauma of self-transformation” which “brings with it a trauma that may split open one’s self and for which, often, the writing out of one’s experience is crucial, at least for the artist. In other words, for diasporas writing becomes one of a number of ‘enabling principles’ like congregational temple, mosque or gurudwara worship” (2007: 187).

For the other residents, the mosque and the meetings of the Bengal Tigers are some of the “enabling principles” and the protagonist will also begin to attend them without her husband’s knowledge. She also begins “small insurrections”, refusing to eat with her husband and then stealthily engaging in binge eating at night. If at the beginning she looked at it as a small victory against her husband who worried that she ate too little, soon it becomes apparent that it was symptomatic of the trauma she suffered when moving out in another country, followed by the tragic death of her son. Taking solace in these midnight meals, Nazneen strives to fill an existential emptiness that encroaches upon her, trying desperately to contain those nightly, unidentifiable terrors. Nazneen cannot cope with this compulsion and after her two daughters start school, she continues isolated in the domestic universe, sweeping up after the girls leave. The fact that she always has to intervene when there are conflicts between Chanu and their elder daughter, Shahana, acting as a negotiator, drains her of energy. Unable to relax, she even comes to question her love for her daughters.

Shahana does not care much about the culture and history of Bangladesh. Instead she wants to wear jeans and skirts and to speak in English and her father disapproves of these acts of rebellion. Compulsive eating does not always succeed in soothing her anxiety. Eventually, all these conflicts and nervous exhaustion take a toll on Nazneen and she suffers a breakdown. During this depressive episode she barely eats and has to stay in bed.

After she recovers her poise, Nazneen has an epiphanic moment when she discovers that clothes could change her life and she could be free as the figure skater if she would get rid of the sari but this moment of revelation does not last long. An important step in her emancipation is getting a job as a seamstress. Nevertheless, she continues in the enclosure of her flat as her husband buys her a sewing machine and a middleman

brings her the clothes at home. The next step in her transformation is taking a lover, Karim, who was a man of action, a young radical, therefore very different from Chanu. This event causes a drastic change in her life as she discovers a more feminine side of her and begins to feel more confident. If at the beginning of her stay in London, she had vivid dreams of her village and childhood, now there were only flickering images of her homeland, signaling the fact that she had managed to slowly let go of her past and look to the future.

The fact that she earns enough money to support her family and pay off the debt to Mrs. Islam and her political participation contribute to this sense of empowerment and awakening. The climatic point of her emancipation is her decision to leave both her husband, who goes alone to Dhaka, and her lover, whom she refuses to marry. She realizes the fact that Karim sought in her the same thing that Chanu did, a nurturing Bengali wife and mother, and that, in fact, they had “made each other up”. Both Chanu and Karim entertained an idealized image of Nazneen that she does not identify with. Realizing the fact that a new marriage would not change anything, Nazneen decides to take fate in her own hands and together with Razia and her friends, they start a business designing clothes, attaining a certain level of financial independence. In the end, her dream of skating comes true, crowning her years of struggle.

Another model of female emancipation is Razia, Nazneen’s friend. Unlike Nazneen, Razia is defiant and cuts her hair, smokes and gives up her sari and starts wearing tracksuits and jeans. Chanu believes that she is not a “respectable type” and does not approve of her behavior. Razia swears and thinks of getting a job to support her children because her husband would not give her money for household expenses and instead sent them to an *iman*. After the death of her husband, she struggles to raise them alone. Razia finds a job at the factory because, as she confesses, there was “no slaughter man to slaughter me now” (2004: 85). After she gains her British passport, she buys a sweatshirt with a large Union Jack printed on the front. Doctor Azad’s wife constitutes a radical model of emancipation. As Uma Narayan underlines, “gender plays a powerful role in immigrant communities, in distinguishing between behavior that constitutes acceptable forms of ‘assimilation’ into the dominant culture, and that which constitutes a ‘failure to preserve one’s cultural identity’” (1997: 175). When Nazneen and Chanu pay an unexpected visit to the doctor, they get to know his wife. She wears a mini skirt, she has a job and allows their

daughter to go to the pub. When discussing about assimilation and adaptation, she states that society is racist because some women make no effort to adapt, walking around covered from head to toe, waiting for the society to change without them changing anything. The second generation of immigrants, represented by Shahana, refuses to preserve the old traditions. She wants to wear Western clothes, does not like to recite poems by Tagore and even runs away from home before the family's planned departure to Bangladesh. Consequently, for the second generation, the process of emancipation does not turn out to be so difficult as they had already begun to assimilate Western values, despite their father's relentless efforts to teach them that the traditional paradigms are worth preserving. In the end, the novel shows us that human beings harbor an incredible resilience but that they must be ready to change if they are to survive.

Conclusions

This paper surveys the issue of immigration in relation to the construction of identity. The immigrants, these "global nomads" as Bauman calls them, struggle with problems such as social integration, finding a job, but also matters of a more intimate nature such a woman's struggle to navigate between her duty as a Muslim wife and her uneasy adjustment to the British society. In this sense, I inquired into the challenging duty women had to perform in the immigrant Bengali community as this community tackles the problem of assimilation while striving to hold on to their cultural identity. As this situation gives raise to radical movements and violent tendencies, I also probed into the issue of multiculturalism and conflict that constitute the background of the novel, focusing also on the conflict at the level of the group (Bengal Tigers vs. Lion Hearts) but also to the conflicted individual, by investigating issues such as displacement, alienation, maladaptation. Group membership impacts on selfhood and the way the individual holds on to the shared beliefs by means of which he wants to stake out an identity that other can witness. Having to cope with destitution and inadequate housing conditions, the residents of Brick Lane are in need of an institutional framework in which to voice their concerns. Consequently, a deep sense of injustice envelops their identity and this is employed to warrant violence and vengeance. They feel empowered by associating in a group called the Bengal Tigers. In the end, I charted the characters' process of cultural negotiation by

exploring their relation with the home they left, *desh*, that is Bangladesh, and the new home they found in London.

Nazneen, the protagonist, lacks communicative competence and this becomes cruelly confining as she has to deal with years of isolation from mainstream society. Confused and disoriented, Nazneen lacks the means for economic integration. Moreover, having to act as a cultural bearer and longing for her homeland and her sister only add to the traumatic experience. Nazneen resorts to manic defence and keeps herself busy while secretly indulging in food at night in a desperate effort to satiate the inner hunger. Rebuilding the post-traumatic self is an arduous process, and the novel explores the psychic landscape of this radical transformation. At the end of the novel, Nazneen emerges as a newly empowered self. Although she seemed less well-equipped than her husband to handle the complex challenges of living like an immigrant, Nazneen shows an extraordinary force of character and comes to adapt better than the naïve Chanu, showing herself capable of supporting her family. Her husband, on the other hand, lurches from job to job, trying to mitigate his anxiety by finding something that would fulfill his need to be effective. He does not find these jobs satisfying because he is convinced that they do not match his intellectual capacities. When Chanu is no longer content with just winning money, he returns to Bangladesh.

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