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**REBELLION: SECOND GENERATION BANGLADESHI IMMIGRANTS IN *BRICK LANE*
BY MONICA ALI**

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Abstract

Brick Lane is one of the few novels which reflect the lives of first and second generation Bangladeshi immigrants in Britain. Although *Brick Lane* focuses on Nazneen as central character, the novel provides very rich information about the life styles, work patterns, family structure, and cultural, social, economic and religious dynamics of the Bangladeshi community in Brick Lane. Ali also shows that the second-generation young Bangladeshis are distinct with their frequent clashes with their parents, their community or the British society at large. Some of them seek solace and solution either in alcohol, drugs and gangs or they unite in religious communities to endure, to oppose and to revolt against these grievances. The 2001 Race Riots which erupted in several British cities against the police and the system as a whole and the long-distance impact of the 9/11 attacks are coincidental with Shahana's escape from home in order not to be taken to Bangladesh and these events intermingle.

Keywords: Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, Bangladeshi immigrants, second-generation immigrants.

Monica Ali's first and controversial novel *Brick Lane* is one of the few novels which are considered to be mirroring the lives of Bangladeshi community in Britain. Although the novel was short-listed for many literary awards it raised tensions among the Bangladeshi people who believed the novel "portrayed Bangladeshis ... as backward, uneducated and unsophisticated, and that this amounted to a despicable insult" (Lea and Lewis, 2006: 1). The novel and the film adaptation, which won a British drama film award in 2007, were protested by petitions, letters and demonstrations by the Bangladeshis who believed both the novel and the film "promulgated stereotypes of Sylhetis, who form 95% of Britain's Bangladeshi community" (Lewis, 2006: 7) and "reinforced pro-racist, anti-social stereotypes and of containing a most explicit, politically calculated violation of the human rights of the community" (Lea and Lewis, 2006: 1). Despite all the setbacks, *Brick Lane* is regarded as very successful in drawing very lively portraits of first- and second- generation Bangladeshi immigrants in the Tower Hamlets of Brick Lane in London from 1987 to 2003.

Although the main focus in *Brick Lane* is on Nazneen and her personal change as a result of her marriage, her move to Britain, her relationship with her husband and her lover, her discontent and her emancipation, it is possible to trace the lives of second-generation

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Bangladeshis in the novel. Broad consensus exists on the difficulty of life conditions of the post-war first-generation immigrants in Britain; however, second-generation immigrants are not immune to social, cultural, economic and financial problems. Solomos (1993: 91) points out to the fact that second-generation immigrants are still vulnerable in many respects:

In societies like Britain, where most post-war immigrants have citizenship and civil rights and face no legal barriers to employment opportunity, there are a whole range of forces which could still conceivably lead to the perpetuation of inequality amongst immigrant groups and ethnic minorities long after the first generations have become settled and consolidated. These could be factors such as the persistence of language and cultural differences, the existence of identity problems amongst the second generation, the educational attainment of the descendants of immigrants, the geographical areas they settled in, the particular occupational and industrial sectors the first immigrants originally found work in, and their own aspirations, preferences and choices.

In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali presents second-generation immigrants whose aspirations and preferences usually clash with those of either parents, or of the Bangladeshi community, or of the mainstream of the British society. The novel offers abundant material on the clash of cultures and clash of generations. On the one hand, in the novel, Ali provides a detailed picture of devout Muslim youth who are obviously agitated and infuriated by racist gangs in the neighborhood and racist and discriminatory practices in the society. On the other hand, Ali portrays young Bangladeshis, Shahana, Shefali, Azad, who were born and raised in Britain and therefore adapted to British culture, British society and British identity as they voice their distaste with Bangladeshi culture, language and life style. The third group of Bangladeshi youth comprises boys like Tariq, Razia's son, who are involved in gangs and drug abuse, which is evidently a serious problem among the Bangladeshi youth. The glimpses offered by Ali on the 2001 riots and the impact of the 9/11 attacks on the lives of Bangladeshi immigrants complement the big picture. None of these second-generation Bangladeshis silently bemoan or resign to their status in the society; on the contrary, they rebel against the prevalent racist and discriminatory practices, cultural, traditional and familial pressures, and economic problems on their own ways.

Ali portrays Bangladeshi girls who resemble British girls of their age by their interests, clothes, tastes, education, linguistic skills, and manners as they have been exposed to the hegemonic effects of the British society and culture since they were born. Shefali is absolutely different from her mother as she is totally absorbed in her exams to be accepted into university; however, she stuns her mother by expressing her desire to spend one year doing nothing before university like most teenagers do in Britain. In a similar manner to Shefali's, Azad is totally assimilated in her outlook and manners because she has discolored hair, wears short skirt, chews gum in front of elders and goes to pubs with her friends. As a proof of the statement that "the second generation will have had all of their schooling in the host country and will almost certainly speak the language fluently" (Algan et al., 2009: 7) Azad, Shefali, Shahana and Bibi are fluent speakers of English and are having British education at school. Therefore, language offers Shahana an opportunity to show her difference and to become critical of her parents. Unlike her mother who can barely speak a few words in English, Shahana learned English as her second language. Although Chanu speaks English fluently he does not like his daughters speaking English at home but as soon as he is out the girls switch to English as the medium of conversation. But unlike Azad and Shefali, Chanu does not allow Shahana and Bibi to enjoy the freedom fluency and schooling in English are supposed to provide them with. Chanu's fury stems from his assumption that the girls fit Karim's pejorative description of westernized girl who "wears what she likes, all the make-up going on, short skirts and that soon as she is out of her father's sight. She's into going out, getting good jobs, having a laugh" by speaking their language and by imitating their behavior, manners and tastes (Ali, 2003: 384).

Evidently Shahana and the girls like her do not wish to live like her parents and they are completely different from their parents. Because "while the first generation immigrant, like

Nazneen, may adhere to the old culture for a long time ... second-generation for whom there are no direct ties to the old culture, often accepts the new culture wholly" (Whipple, 2003: 8). Unlike her mother, Shahana refuses to wash her hair with liquid hair and demands shampoo and moisturizer for her skin. When Chanu attempts to teach her daughters how to use a computer and have an access to internet, he is surprised to see that Shahana knows much more about computers than her father. Clothing is another source of dispute between the girls and their parents. Shefali's clothes annoy her mother from time to time. Once Razia held one of the glittery vests and bitterly complained that "Shefali tried to go out of the house wearing some little thing like this" (Ali, 2003: 231). In like manner, Shahana refuses to wear traditional Bangladeshi clothes and insists on wearing jeans and skirts like her British friends at school. Chanu gets often angry with her because of her inappropriate clothes and warns her "to put on some decent clothes" (Ali, 2003: 252); however, Shahana seizes every chance like her mother's nervous breakdown and her father's consequent distraction as an opportunity to wear "her tight jeans" (Ali, 2003: 327). When Chanu warns her about rubbish on TV, she dares to talk back to her father: "How do you know it is rubbish if you even don't know what it is?" (Ali, 2003: 319).

Ali portrays Shahana as a disobedient, confrontational and westernized girl who refuses to do anything with her parents' culture, habits, values, likes and customs. Shahana is one of the second-generation immigrants who are "stranded between two cultures, in conflict with their parents, facing difficulty of negotiating two incommensurable value systems. The problem was that they might not integrate smoothly into British society; the authoritarian and old-fashioned cultures of their parents deemed to be holding them back" (Parker, 1995: 12). She bluntly expresses her dislike of Bangladeshi music during the preparations for the mela. Chanu plays music by famous Bangladeshi singers but "Shahana put her fingers in her ears and screwed up her face" (Ali, 2003: 359). She refuses everything she associates with Bangladeshi people and culture:

Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali is 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 not more than poet and Nobel laureate, and no less than the true father of her nation. Shahana did not care. (Ali, 2003:180)

Chanu fervently tries to teach his daughters about Islam, Bangladeshi history and Bangladeshi culture; however, Shahana evidently considers her culture and traditions to be inferior and despicable. Her self-consciousness and self-despise become tangible during their first and only excursion in the bus as she becomes worried her parents will "stink the bus" (Ali, 2003: 290), which shows that she has come to believe the stereotype that sub-continentals stink.

Her discontent with her family and the culture they are representing turns into frustration and overt disobedience with Chanu's decision to return to Bangladesh for good. She does not want to go to Bangladesh at all and she regards her father's decision as "kidnap" (Ali, 2003: 374) because for her Bangladesh is a foreign country which she identifies with backwardness, oppression and degradation. For Shahana, Bangladesh is a country where people use twigs instead of toothbrush and water instead of toilet paper and where husbands beat their wives. She has a such pessimistic view of the country that she is assured that Bibi would be made to marry in Bangladesh and that her husband would keep her "locked up in a smelly room and make [her] weave carpets all day long" (Ali, 2003: 395). In addition to her tantrums, hysteria fits and physical attacks to her sister, Bibi, and her mother, she resorts to more drastic measures. First she tries to cajole her father with various forms of self-mutilation as she wants to have her lip pierced and a tattoo which she believes would provide an immunity as her father would not take her with those shameful marks. However, this attempt does not work and "the children were distorted with anxiety" (Ali, 2003: 438). She takes another step and tries to break his leg to prevent or at least to delay their return as "Shahana had

stamped on her foot ... 'I hope it's broken,' said Shahana. She cracked her thumb joint" (Ali, 2003: 438). She declares her ultimatum by biting her father's hand to her parents that she would run away rather than go to Bangladesh. Desperately realizing that she will not be able to make her father change his mind, she runs away from home with another girl of her age to Paignton where "there were no Bangladeshis and they could do as they pleased" (Ali, 2003: 466). It is noteworthy that Nishi with whom Shahana escapes does it so because Nishi does not want to marry like her elder sister who was made to marry at 16.

Indeed Shahana expressed her plight very clearly when she said "I didn't ask to be born here" (Ali, 2003: 181). From the moment she was born she was exposed to the irrefutable impact of the British culture and gradually and inevitably she is becoming anglicized. The hegemonic British culture minimizes the effect of the Bangladeshi culture which Chanu has desperately been trying to imbue. Therefore Shahana can not conform to the standards her father and the greater Bangladeshi community expect her to have. Her rebellion is consequential to her life style which exposes her to the hegemonic impact of the British society and culture. As a typical second-generation teenager who was born and raised in Britain, she is totally receptive and responsive to the cultural impositions of the British culture. If it were not for her parents, her integration into the British culture would be smoother and quicker. Despite all the setbacks, Shahana, Shefali, Nishi and Azad daughter veer towards inevitable integration into the dominant culture.

In addition to conflicts with parents, these young people start "to feel deeply their condition as second-class citizens, and they question their identity and status in society" (Bedarida, 1990: 319). Second-generation immigrants who are "divided between two countries and two cultures" suffer from "a malaise which is sometimes latent, sometimes acute" (Bedarida, 1990: 318). This malaise materializes with desperate search of consolation, remedy, better life standards and respect in drugs, alcohol and gangs because the young Bangladeshis are unable to cope with their alienation, exclusion and secondary status in society otherwise. Dr. Azad is very concerned about the increasing number of young Bangladeshis, like Jorina's son, who are addicted to alcohol and says "... our children are copying what they see here, going to the pub, to nightclubs. Or drinking at home in their bedrooms where their parents think they are perfectly safe" (Ali, 2003: 31). Ali (2003: 387) elaborates on the idea by shedding more light on these disconcerted young men:

It was said that the gangs had a long history of rivalry, dating back to their school days when they bunked off to attend noon-time raves in darkened warehouses, getting changed in the toilet, taking nips of whisky and drags of cigarettes and listening to Joi Bangla, Michael Jackson, James Brown, Amiruddin and Abdul Gani, making up new dances and hostilities, inventing their lives in a way that no one - especially their parents - had imagined for them.

But the involvement with alcohol, drugs and gangs prove vain attempts to evade the inherent troubles in the society and both the boys and their parents are distressed and disheartened in the end. As Dr. Azad says, the heroin abuse is related to "lack of funding" (Ali, 2003: 248) for boys like Tariq who initially comes up as a boy who gets hysterical and mutinous because of financial problems. He needs money for taking and not failing his exams at school but Tariq transforms into one of the young addicts who frequently steal from their parents (Ali, 2003: 315). He is drifted into disaster gradually after he starts abusing and dealing drugs. After secretly selling all the furniture, TV and video at home because of debts to gangs for selling drugs, he begins having fits for drugs. He vomits, cries, insults his mother and wants money for buying drugs. The families and the community are unable to help these young Bangladeshis because rather than looking for medical aid, the families are more concerned with moral burden of their addiction as they believe "they bring shame on the family. Anyone who had any sense would send them back to Bangladesh" (Ali, 2003: 390). Alam (2003: 1) sheds light on the prevalence of drug abuse and alcohol and threat of related criminal behavior for the Bangladeshi community in Britain:

The racist violence of a decade ago led to the formation of Bengali gangs. Today, the problem that is expected to tear the community apart within a few short years is widespread drug abuse. Almost half the borough's drug rehabilitation clients are Bengali men and women. Given that the borough's population is itself almost fifty percent Bengali, this should be no great surprise. But much of the community tries to deny that these problems exist and likes to think of drugs and alcohol as exclusively "western" problems. If they will admit privately that the issues need to be tackled, they will usually add the warning that we must not wash the community's dirty laundry in public. Yet addiction has contributed to a plethora of anti-social behaviour like anti-white racism, petty theft and continued gang violence.

In addition to "the growing epidemic of heroin abuse" (Kundnani, 2001: 2) particularly the decline of the cotton-spinning mills and the collapse of the textile industry in British cities in the 1970s resulted in a serious unemployment problem for people living in textile cities because "the work once done cheaply by Bangladeshi workers in the north of England could now be done even more cheaply by Bangladeshi workers in Bangladesh" (Kundnani, 2001: 1). The race riots from April to July 2001 in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Bradford, Burnley and Oldham were coincidental with the disturbances in the Tower Hamlets area of Brick Lane. The attacks of white racist youth who considered immigrants as "a threat to British jobs, competition for decent housing and a drain on education and health services" (Marsden, 2001: 1) against the South Asian youths, women, children and property culminated into rioting and fighting between South Asian youths and police. Marsden (2001: 1) puts the blame on "the provocations by various fascist groups ... endemic poverty and social deprivation, the endorsement of racist sentiments by both the Conservative and Labour parties, as well as the mass media, and the repressive actions and inflammatory statements of the police". Harris and Bright (2001: 1) agree with Marsden on the causes of these riots as they claim Asians were "gripped by poverty and unemployment, pushed into segregated, failing schools and fearful of a police force they see as hostile". Kundnani (2001: 1) also mentions that segregation in housing and segregation in education led to widespread frustration and discontentment among the young Bangladeshis and "the rage of young Pakistanis and Bangladeshis of the second and third generations, deprived of futures, hemmed in on all sides of racism" burned the cities for days.

Indeed, Kundnani (2001: 2) relates the main impulse in the race riots of the Asian youth to their different mentality because "by the 1990s, a new generation of young Asians was coming of age in the northern towns, born and bred in Britain, and unwilling to accept the second-class status foisted on their elders. When racists came to their street looking for fight, they would meet violence with violence" rather than simply accepting the status quo or resigning to their fate. Bangladeshi youth in the area "(but mostly young men) are disillusioned by the immigrant experiences of their parents, who struggled in a country that was at times hostile to their presence and at best sadly inept to help with their transition to English life" (Kundnani, 2001: 1). Instead of bemoaning their condition passively they began "to distance themselves from their parents, whom they had come to see as passive ... [they] raged hard, forming action committees and youth fronts" (Sandhu, 2003: 1).

These concerns find an echo in *Brick Lane* as Karim and some other Bangladeshi people establish Bengal Tigers to fight racism and brutality in the wake of the Race Riots and the 9/11. Chanu, who considers Britain as "their country" (Ali, 2003: 255), has tried hard to become successful in Britain; however, he has finally come to the conclusion that "[he] has been waiting on the wrong side of the road that was already full" (Ali, 2003: 320). He gets tired of "racism, ignorance, poverty, all of that" (Ali, 2003: 320) and decides to return to Bangladesh. In contrast to Chanu, for Karim, a second-generation immigrant who has never been to Bangladesh, Britain is his country (Ali, 2003: 211) and he has never considered going to Bangladesh. Instead Karim and other young Bangladeshis voice their resolution to stay and fight: "We are for Muslim rights and culture. We are into protecting our local ummah and supporting the global ummah ... We are against any group that opposes us" (Ali, 2003: 241). These young men and women portrayed in *Brick Lane* are very similar to the rioters who ravaged the streets during the race

riots as they “want action, not words; they talk of rights not tolerance” (Harris and Bright, 2001: 3). Chanu and Nazneen watch the Oldham riots on TV:

There were pictures of hooded young men, scarves wrapped Intifada-style around their faces, hurling stones, furious with the cars that they set alight. Between the scarves and the hoods it was possible to catch glimpses of brown skin. There were pictures of police too, but they were hiding behind sheets of clear plastic, sometimes shuffling forward and sometimes shuffling back. (Ali, 2003: 276)

Their attitude stems from being born in Britain yet feeling barred from British society” (Harris and Bright, 2001: 3). As Chanu observes “the young ones don’t want to keep quiet anymore” (Ali, 2003: 258) and they vigorously start a leafleting campaign against the racist Lion Hearts organization which was opposing immigration, Islamification of the neighborhood, and multiculturalism in Britain, and shunning Islam as “a religion of hate and intolerance” (Ali, 2003: 251). The leafleting campaigns of the Lion Hearts transform into a march against mullahs and militants whereas Bengal Tigers retaliate by calling the residents in the area to oppose the march by organizing “the March Against the March Against the Mullahs” (Ali, 2003: 406).

The first-generation immigrants “regard their stay temporary [and] they do not integrate culturally but create a cultural enclave with the help of religion and language and facilitated by council housing allocation” (Cuevas, 2008: 387). Particularly Islam is the strongest motif beyond the organization of these young people against the racist white gangs in the area. Young Bangladeshi Ali portrays in her novel stick out with their strict adherence to Islam and Bangladeshi codes of conduct. Indeed, the new generation who were ardently devoted to Islamic principles began to show reaction to the rise of violent attacks on Bangladeshis which began in the 1970s when

skinhead gangs began to stalk Brick Lane, smashing windows, spitting at children, carving up the faces and backs of bystanders ... soon Bengali schoolchildren were being allowed out of school early, their mothers walking to work in numbers for fear of being ambushed or pelted, and parents imposing curfews on their kids. Tower Hamlets fitted council-tenants with fire-proof letterboxes. (Sandhu, 2003: 1)

As a matter of fact, their concerns with the injustices, racism and discrimination in the Tower Hamlets quickly gain a global dimension as these Bangladeshi youth embrace Islam. Islam provides them with an identity and unification they desperately need. Kundnani (2001: 4) elaborates on the idea as he believes “A generation of Asians, discarded for their class, excluded for their race, stigmatized for their religion, ghettoized and forgotten, has found its voice – but is yet to be heard”. They find more strength by identifying their struggle with a noble cause and they commit themselves to and champion the plight of Muslims all over the world. They believe thousands of Muslims suffered from wars, terror, poverty, hunger, and inequality in Bosnia, Chechnya, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq and they remain unnoticed in the mass media.

As an immediate reaction to the 9/11, “a pinch of New York dust blew across the ocean and settled on the Dogwood estate” (Ali, 2003: 368). These young Bangladeshis who have already become strained with the Race Riots get further infuriated and apprehensive as a result of the event because Sorupa’s daughter’s hijab is pulled off and Razia’s Union Jack sweatshirt is spat on on the street. Some parents become so anxious that they tell their daughters “to leave their scarves at home” (Ali, 2003: 376) lest they be attacked by white people. However, apprehension and fury transform into tougher actions, angrier words, stronger determination and radicalization on part of the young Bangladeshis. More or less democratic structure of the organization change in favor of men as the girls who attended the preliminary meetings in hijab start wearing burkhas and some people oppose their presence in the meetings as they suppose “the Qur’an bids us separate” (Ali, 2003: 285). In a similar manner to the girls, Karim gives up his jeans and sneakers and starts wearing traditional Bangladeshi clothes. In the end some of them turn into radicals who could not even tolerate women or music.

Their response to the 9/11 shows their different attitude and perspective because rather than condemning the 9/11 they believe that the 9/11 would bring harm to Muslims all over the world. They do not find the evidence that was presented to the world public convincing. Karim does not believe that the hijackers forgot their Qur'an in the taxi as Muslims do not carry Qur'an everywhere with them. Although all the black boxes of the planes were destroyed they can not understand how one of the attackers' passports survived the blast and extreme heat and was found in the rubble of the World Trade Center. They all conclude that these attacks must have been made by people who benefit from the consequences. One of the girls attending the meeting of the Bengal Tigers bitterly complains that the world public did not show any interest in approximately 35000 children who died of hunger on 9/11 whereas the Questioner of the Bengal Tigers blames the USA for killing innocent people for revenge and retaliation. Obviously the Bangladeshi youth do not have any sympathy for the 9/11 atrocities as they are preoccupied with other atrocities elsewhere.

To conclude, in *Brick Lane*, Ali portrays teenagers who refuse to conform to traditional, familial and cultural patterns and young people who voice their rejection of racist practices, and revolt against the system, morality and conventions either in illegal trades and gangs or in Islam. Young Bangladeshis' disobedience against their parents mingled with the riots of the Bangladeshi youths against the established structures and dominant ideologies in the end because the riots which erupted in their city were coincidental with Shahana's escape from her parents for fear of being taken to Bangladesh. Like Shahana who was struggling to live in the country in which she was born, bred and adapted, the young Bangladeshis were trying to survive and make their voices heard through disturbances, lootings, sirens, shop alarms, blazing torches, snakes of tyres in flame, smashing and pushing the police cars, hurling of empty bottles, full cans, bricks, chairs and sticks (Ali, 2003: 471-474). In spite of the destruction, chaos and violence of the riots, the young Bangladeshis benefited from the consequences as Shahana stayed in Britain and the politicians and government officers started frequenting the Tower Hamlets to better their life conditions.

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