

Modernity city geographies of London

How is London and London life represented in novel -BRICK LANE written by Monica Ali.?

“London has been peopled as much in the mind as in its streets. No city has been written about more. Nowhere else have novelists more frequently chosen to plot narratives, set characters and explore circumstances.” (Jerry White 2003,p.1)

“The City is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature.” (Park,1925/1984,p.1)

To fully analysis the extent to which the novel- Brick Lane gives a sense of representation of London and city life to the reader, first one must consider the background and social identities of the author, in this case - Monica Ali.

‘Monica Ali brings humour, grace and the special qualities of the best of Asian fiction to a narrative concerned with acceptance and denial...Wry and intelligent, subtle and graceful in its mix of formal prose, blackly despairing humour and fabulous characterization, this is a rich human novel’(The Sunday Express, India).Ali was not born in England but in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and moved to England at the age of three, where she was raised. She has never lived in Brick lane where the novel was focused on and she was from a middle- class family and eventually attended higher education at WadhamCollage, Oxford. Therefore, some people are starting to question how she managed to recreate the lifestyle of a Bangladeshi family living in the inner city of London. Firstly, she was born in Bangladesh which gave her a sense of attachment with her origin. Secondly, with the help from NailaKabeer, whose study of Bangladeshi women garment workers in London and Dhaka, Monica Ali drew inspiration.(Brick Lane, P493). Moreover, her inspiration of the story was supported by many people whose have a strong social identity of Bangladeshi people in London and British immigrant experience. E.g. Nicole Aragi and Shofiur.

“The book follows Nazneen and Hasina, living very different lives in very different places, but finally daring to hope that they may have found a similar sort of happiness. The themes are the big ones - identity, self-determination, the freight of family - and they are kept afloat by the buoyancy of Ali's characterisation, which occasionally verges on the Dickensian without ever resorting to caricature. In Nazneen's world, everyone is convincingly governed by their own individual logic.”(Harriet Lane, The Observer Sunday 1 June 2003)

The book exposes many features of London and its people's daily life to the reader, which included issues like: Race tension, Cultures, Estate life, gender relation and the

landscape of the city of London. However, I will be more focusing on the representation of Race tension and changing cultures in London. In due course, I will link some of these representations with the theory of place and identity (Tim Cresswell), Robert Park and Mumford idea of City and Postcolonial London (John Mcleod).

“Since the end of Second World War, the urban and human geography of London has been irreversibly altered as a consequence of patterns of migration from countries with a history of colonialism, so that today a number of London 'sneighbourhoods are known primarily in terms of the “ overseas” populations they have nurtured. Whitechapel and Tower Hamlets boast significant Bangladeshi communities.” (John Mcleod)

According to Mcleod, the multicultural London was developed during the postcolonial period and people from the ex-colony were flooding into the “heart” of the Empire - London, looking for a new life and opportunities. The story of “Brick Lane” was a direct product of postcolonial London, which is about change, cultural, social, and political and conflict. It was Black and Asian migrants who have together played a major role in creating London's multicultural society and “Brick Lane” highlighted the levels of poverty and discrimination had on them. “In other words, “postcolonial London” does not factually denote a given place or mark a stable location on a map. It emerges at the intersection of the concrete and the noumenal, between the material conditions of metropolitan life and the imaginative representations made of it. It is as much a product of “facticity” as a creation of the novels. (John Mcleod) According to Lewis Mumford and Robert Park, city should not only defined by its physical form. Whatever it was that makes a city a city (London), it had more to do with its social processes.(Doreen Massey) Decolonization has speeded up London's heterogeneity, intensity of social interaction and contrasts. In order word, London as a World city is a city produced, experienced and lived imaginatively and also incubating new social relations and cultural forms which conflict with the advocacy of a national culture or the pursuit of cultural nationalism. (John Mcleod)

“With Vast numbers of people living in the city, there are bound to be wide range of variations amongst them. This should give rise to the spatial segregation of individuals according to colour, ethnic heritage, economic and social status, tastes and preferences.” (Louis Wirth)

In Brick Lane, Monica Ali portrayed the conflict between Race and culture of the inner city remarkably well. In Chapter two and three, she has focused on describing the culture of London and migrants in conversations between different characters. “Two in one week! But now 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. The problem is our community is not properly educated” said by Dr Azad (P.31, Chapter two), this short conversation between Chanu and Dr Azad clearly described the problem of inner city migrants whose have not educated enough to teach their offspring what is right or wrong, they neglected their children because they were busy working to earn money. Also the second generation migrants are generally

copying the drinking culture but not controlling themselves. In Page 40, Monica uses the eye of the main Character - Nazneen to describe the rotten anti social behavior by teenagers in council estate, "She looked down into the courtyard. Two boys exchanged mock punches, feinting left and right. Cigarettes burned in their mouths. She opened the window and leaned into the breeze." (P.40). She also use the Tattoo Lady who did not get named to describe the working class white who lived in council housing and gave them a stereotype features - "She scratched her arms, her shoulders, the accessible portions of her buttocks. She yawned and lit a cigarette. At least two thirds of the flesh on show was covered in ink. Nazneen had never been close enough to decipher the designs. Chanu said the tattoo lady was Hell's Angel." (P.18 Chapter one.) Monica once again uses conversation between characters to deliver the message to the reader, "Three point five people to one room. That's a council statistic," Chanu told Nazneen. "All crammed together. They can't stop having children, or they bring over all their relatives and pack them in like little fish in a tin. It's a Tower Hamlets official statistic: three point five Bangladeshis to one room." (P.49 Chapter. 2), "But the main thing is education. The parents are so ashamed they don't know what to do. Sometimes they send the child back home, where the really cheap." (P248 Chapter 12), "We need two things. More drugs counselors and more jobs for the young people said the Doctor." (P249, Chapter 12) Up to here, she already given enough information for the reader to create own imagination of the rotten down and packed inner city estate area with high density of migrants, working class white, second generation migrants, drug problem and uneducated parents.

"Place is how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world."
(Tim Cresswell)

"Place is about stopping and resting and becoming involved. While space is amenable to the abstraction of spatial science and economic rationality, place is amenable to discussions of things such as "value" and belonging". (Tuan 1977, 149)

Place is hard to define but Tuan and Cresswell had done its definition perfectly well. London is a "Place", even "Brick lane" and "Nazneen's flat" are also a place where everything is interacting with each other. It was the sense of place that creates the unique social structure of immigrant communities and London. "Nazneen stared at a notice on the wall, printed in five languages. - No smoking, no eating, no drinking". (P64, Chapter 3) In this passage, it was "place" which create this unique features of Brick lane as it has got all sort of foreigners lived in and they are interacting with each other within the same place. Moreover, In Chapter 14, Monica describe the Chanu family have never left Brick lane or areas around it, although places like the Houses of Parliament, Buckingham Palace and Hype-Park are very close to Brick Lane. In a sense, she use the family tour day as a Metaphor to describe the immigrant family do not go out their own neighbourhood, a sense of isolation with other part of the city and an intense sense of localism. In the other hand, place had a profound effect on changing people e.g. Chanu (The "educated"), Mrs Azad and second generation migrants (Tariq, bibi and Shahana.). For example, Place has turned Chanu to mix into the English culture and

eventually accepted it in order to survive in the society- "its part of the culture here. It's so ingrained in the fabric of society. Back Home, if you drink you risk being an outcast. In London, if you don't drink you risk the same things." (P110, Chapter 5), another example from Mrs Azad during the conversation with Chanu "Listen, when I'm in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work. I work with white girls and I am just one of them."(P114, Chapter5) and also when Nazneen refers to Bangladesh as "our country," Karim makes it clear that he considers England to be his country in page 212. (Bookrags) and Shahana spoke in English during the conversation with Chanu about internet and technologies. -This little wire that goes into the telephone socket-do you see it ?- it all comes down the wire." "We go on the internet at school,"saidShahana, in English." (P200,Chapter 9)

"Home obviously means more than a natural of physical setting. Especially, the term cannot be limited to a built place. A useful point of departure for understanding home may be not its material manifestation but rather a concept : home is a unit of space organized mentally and materially to satisfy a people's real and perceived basic biosocial needs and, beyond the, their higher aesthetic-political aspirations."

(Tim Cresswell)

There is a clear connection made between place and second generation migrants, they already regard "London" as the place they "belong" to, whereas Bangladeshi and the language of Bangladeshi (Bengali) are just memory and heritage of their parent. In a sense these second generation migrants were trying to produce a new type of social memory and eager to get out from the bottom of social hierarchy and mix in with the dominant social group within the "place"- London. "Rootedness and authenticity". In Harvey's discussion of place this meaning is retained but becomes a symbol of reactionary exclusivity. As long as place signifies a tight and relatively immobile connection between a groups of people and a site then it will be constantly implicated in the construction of "us" (people who belong in a place) and "them" (people who do not)." (Tim Cresswell) In this way the rootedness and authenticity of place will create tension between different race groups, especially the working class white who are most threaten of their social and employment position to be taken out by the migrants. Therefore, conflict is inevitable. The following 2 extracts described the reason of racial tension perfectly well:

"It is the white underclass, like Wilkie, who are most afraid of people like me. To him, and people like him, we are the only thing standing in the way of them sliding totally to the bottom of the pile. As long as we are below them, then they are above something. If they see us rise then they are resentful because we have left our proper place. That is why you get the phenomenon of the National Front. They can play on those fears to create racial tensions, and give these people a superiority complex. The middle classes are more secure, and therefore more relaxed." Chanu said." (P38, Chapter two).

Leaflet from "Lion Heart" (a white working class organization) - "HANDS OFF OUR BREASTS! The Islamification of our neighbourhood has gone too far. A Page 3 calendar and poster have been removed from the walls of our community hall. How long before the extremists are putting veils on our women and insulting our daughters for wearing short skirts? Do not tolerate it ! Write to the council! This is England!" (P257 Ch12)

These two extracts allow us to think how weak of the bond between national majorities and minorities. There are two main outcomes for migrants; they either become economic migrant which suggests that people enter the country just for the sake of money, making as much money as possible before returning. The other outcome is - Hyphenated British which indicates a movement from outsider to insider, from temporary resident to permanent settler and from a predominantly homogeneous to an increasingly heterogeneous society. (John Eade) However, the White majorities are the ones that feel most threaten, afraid of migrants taking out all of the available jobs within the City and also their living space, culture and social benefits.

Linking back to the introduction, Monica Ali was not raised in the area of Brick Lane and had never been in a working class family. The novel is completely a work of the imagination influenced by her father's story of Mymensingh countryside and her friend NailaKabeer who study about the lives of Bangladeshi women garment workers. Although this essay had only focused on the issues of changing culture, place/identity, and race tension, there are still a lot more issues reflecting London's life and the city of London itself e.g. Gender relations, Landscape of London and economic environment. "This optimism about England as a land of possibility is linked to a more general feminist politics of liberation which may help to partly explain the book's success in both the UK and the USA." (John Eade). In terms of the essay's main theme- Culture, place and race, many conversations with in "Brick Lane" represent the changing of the newcomers and they are becoming one of the key forces of a changing British nation. "Their Britishness is mediated through the social and cultural heritage of their country of origin which produces a hyphenated identity through the interweaving of class, gender, generation, religion and language." (John Eade) Finally, Monica Ali uses the event of 9/11 as an opportunity to describe the Bangladeshi or Islamic communities seek to show how their true color is and representation to the outside world, especially the National Majority.

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