

Chapter 5

The Effect of Colonialism on the Bangladeshi Female Immigrant in Britain

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of the Bangladeshi immigrant woman in Britain and the effects of patriarchy in the Bangladeshi community on the immigrant female as noted by the life of the protagonist Nazneen and other female characters in the novel titled, Brick Lane by Monica Ali. Further the essay also compares and contrasts South Asian immigrant women to show how one group (a woman from India) is affected differently from her South Asian sister from Bangladesh. To understand the difference between the two groups of immigrant women, Monica Ali's novel was contrasted with Tarquin Hall's heroine from his novel Salam Brick Lane. By examining the role of South Asian immigrant women in Britain, other issues about immigrant culture was also brought to the forefront, such as religion, specifically Islam to show its effect on the lives of immigrant women in countries outside their own.

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INTRODUCTION

The role propagated to Bengali women in India during the 19th century by male Bengali writers was that of the “holder of one’s culture.” Many writers, such as Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, Rammohun Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, showed through their writings, the importance of the role of the Bengali woman as she retained the Hindu culture from the colonizer by both metaphorically and physically remaining on the “inside.” This role of the woman being the holder of one’s culture came in a timely fashion when the men of Indian society were beginning to see their roles changing with the first rumblings of “independence from imperialism” beginning in 1857 in the form of the Sepoy Rebellion or the Indian Mutiny. Although the rebellion was quashed by the British, the fact remained that the sepoys rebelled because the cartridges that they used in their rifles were greased by animal fat, which was against their religion, and which hailed the beginnings of unrest between the colonizer and the colonized. But there was unrest on the outside between the colonizer and the men. The women, on the other hand, had to retain the culture of the home while the men were out fighting the outsider/imperialist. This particular idea of the woman being on the inside for the betterment of one’s culture can be held as being true even today.

We will be using Monica Ali’s novel, *Brick Lane* to show how immigrant women in the 21st century still have to negotiate a space and role for themselves inside and outside the home. We will also show how Monica Ali’s Bangladeshi immigrant protagonist, Nazneen, positions her life as an immigrant worker in London, both inside and outside her home. The premise of the essay is to show the negotiation that the migrant woman makes in her relationship between the inside/outside, her natal home/her home on foreign soil and how the migrant woman is attempting through her labor both inside and outside her home to write herself into the western nation’s discourse. The negotiation allows the woman to empower herself as she bridges the gap between the inside/outside culture of the home and the world. This empowerment is revealed later in the essay when Nazneen, the protagonist, silently empowers herself as she obtains a job as a seamstress, which emancipates her, and allows her to make her decision to live in London.

Briefly, in looking at the history of migration and women’s roles in it, Su-Ju-Cheng (1999) notes in her essay titled, “Labor Migration and International Sexual Division of Labor,” that women were “either invisible or treated as dependents of male migrants without individual identities” (p.40). Further in the case of women in international migration, they have “existed to perform certain functions that have been built on the existing gender stratification, “which has “further reinforced the hierarchical gender structure” (p.41). One sees such a structure in Ali’s *Brick Lane*, when Nazneen, Ali’s protagonist maintains the inside culture of the home while her

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