

Nazneen as an 'Emerging Woman': A Womanist Reading of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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The intersectionality of race and gender has made it necessary for the colored woman to constantly interrogate feminism which is silent about the problems of racism. Minority voices are forced into silence due to a lack of just representation. According to women of color, the mainstream feminist movement addresses, in the main, concerns of white, middle class women, and dismisses the experiences of these minority groups as insignificant and irrelevant. Being non-white and female, the diasporic woman finds herself in no man's land. She is unable to identify herself either with her own community where patriarchy does not let her live a fulfilled life, or feminism that is markedly 'white' and caters to the problems faced by the white woman, ignoring racism which is a major source of oppression for the colored woman along with sexism.

Many women, sharing marginalized positions, generate alternate platforms to counter the inadvertently narrow world view of feminism. Alice Walker's concern for the black woman's rights has made her a strong advocate of black feminism leading her to propound the term 'womanism' to describe an appreciation for all aspects of womanhood while embodying the largely uncared-for standpoint of black and other minority feminists. As a stance for black woman to voice her differences from the white woman, the word "womanism" first appeared in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). Womanism seeks to fill the voids left by feminism. Walker gives an extensive four-point definition of womanism, lending it openness of meaning, providing a platform to all women regardless of their ethnicity or class.

As a historian for the black women in Diaspora/ home, Walker classifies them under three cycles: 'Suspended,' 'Assimilated,' and 'Emergent.' Chronologically, the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early decades of twentieth century belong to first cycle of women. The women of forties and fifties in twentieth century belong to the second cycle as this was the prime time when they wanted to get assimilated into the mainstream culture of the diaspora, be it America or England. However, the third cycle begins in the late sixties when women started to exhibit the qualities of the growing, emergent model.

The three cycles of women as suggested by Alice Walker can be traced in Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane*. However, the chronology that Walker traces is not exactly applicable; still the defining features she theorizes can be seen in various characters. From the very beginning of the novel, Ruban turns out to be belonging to the first category that, according to Walker, bear every oppression very patiently and quietly, thinking that it is their fate and they should not retaliate. The second cycle of women as spoken of by Walker tries to assimilate into the diasporic culture. Razia and Mrs. Azad belong to this category of women. They are so fed up of the patriarchal set up of their own culture that they feel that assimilating into the western way of living is the only way out for them. Nazneen, the protagonist, can be identified as the third category of women as given by Walker. Interestingly, the

novel can be called a bildungsroman since it shows the development of Nazneen from being the first kind of women to the third. It is the women belonging to the third cycle who qualify as 'womanists.' Therefore, Nazneen turns out to be a womanist in Walker's terms. The present paper limits itself to Nazneen's growth with reference to the third category according to Walker's cycles.

Nazneen, though brought up to be the same kind of 'saint' as her mother is, develops into a mature woman who is very much aware of her role, rights, and duties as a woman. Nazneen can undoubtedly be called a womanist since she qualifies for many of the characteristics that a womanist has according to Walker.

In the beginning of the novel, Nazneen is married off to a much older man, Chanu who lives in London. She has to move to England despite her strong love for her own motherland. Without complaining she starts living with her husband in Brick Lane, London. After spending six months of dry life there Nazneen, deep down, develops a desire to go back to Bangladesh but since she has never complained of anything her whole life, she feels scared of desiring anything. She says, "If I were the wishing type, I know what I would wish" (Ali 18). But she repents immediately for thinking about any desire. The large wardrobe in Nazneen's bedroom scares her endlessly. Once in a dream, she gets trapped inside that cupboard. Ali writes, "Sometimes she dreamed she was locked inside it and hammered and hammered but nobody heard" (24). Her dream is symbolic of her lonely life in England.

Nazneen has never been taught to ask questions by her mother. So, she never asks for anything from Chanu who is a subtle patriarch. He has inherited patriarchy from his cultural and religious values but, since education has refined him a little, he does not claim to be a patriarch. But he never gives any importance to Nazneen feelings or wants. He has his own logic why Nazneen should not go out often. He says, "Why should you go out? If you go out, ten people will say, "I saw her walking on the street." And I will look like a fool. Personally, I don't mind if you go out but these people are so ignorant. What can you do?" (45) The tragedy is that Chanu feels that he is a modern man who understands and respects the desires of a woman. But there is always a contradiction. He says, "I don't stop you from doing anything. I am westernized now. It was lucky for you that you married an educated man. That was a stroke of luck" (45). However, he always dictates Nazneen on what to do, whom to meet, and where to go. He subtly stops her from doing everything she desires to do. He delimits her vision of life.

Walker suggests that a womanist always has the desire to know more than what is considered as good for women to know. Nazneen has never been given the opportunity to learn things. She does not possess much knowledge of things. But she craves to know about things. She expresses her desire to learn English time and again because language is a great tool of empowerment. When she expresses her desire to learn English, he represses it immediately, "It will come. Don't worry about it. Where is the need anyway?" (37) At another instance when she again insists on learning English, he first ignores her and goes on speaking something irrelevant, but when she insists on her point, he suppresses her voice by warning her that she is pregnant. The child will keep her busy. The subtlety of Chanu's exercising power over Nazneen can be seen in a scene where he actually prohibits her from meeting Razia, who is her only friend there, "Razia, on the other hand, I would not call a respectable type. I'm not saying anything against her . . . Just keep it in mind. I don't forbid you to see Razia, but I ask you to keep it in mind" (83-84).

The desire to learn things is so overpowering for Nazneen that she always gathers bits and pieces of English. She learns from the television and later on from her own daughters. Karim, her lover, opens up the world for her. He talks to her and makes her feel important. It is through him that she gets

knowledge of the world outside. He gives her Bengali Newsletters to read which Chanu never does. He encourages her to attend the meetings held by the Bengal Tigers, an Islamic Association created by them against the anti-Islamicists. Nazneen has the desire to participate in things happening around. Once, when she attends a meeting, she votes for Karim as the Chairman of the party and he wins by one vote. She feels thrilled that she has made him win. Ali writes, "It was close. Nine votes for the Questioner and ten for Karim. I have given him victory, thought Nazneen. She felt it a momentous thing" (242). She has an intense desire for knowledge which is further proved by her action at one point when she "picked up one of Chanu's books and turned it over, pressed her thumbs on the cover as if she could squeeze the knowledge from it." (317)

Nazneen loves to see the dance that the ice-skaters perform over television. Whenever she looks at the woman, she thinks that the woman is so powerful and immersed in herself that she has totally forgotten the world outside. When she seems to fall down, her man always rescues her, holding her hand in a tight grip. Nazneen feels thrilled. This is the first thing that has caught her interest after coming to England. Her eyes remain glued to the screen every time she sees the show. She saw the woman on screen: "She stopped dead and flung her arms above her head with a look so triumphant that you knew she had conquered everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her"(36). After that, for the whole week, Nazneen kept on watching the same program on television. While watching, ". . . she was no longer a collection of hopes, random thoughts, petty anxieties and selfish wants that made her, but was whole and pure. The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white light, glory" (41).

At a later stage in the novel, she wears Chanu's trousers and tried to pose like the ice-skating lady in front of the mirror. She wishes to change her fate now. She wanted to be free like any other English woman: "And if she had a tiny tiny skirt with knickers to match and a tight bright top, then she would – how could she not? – skate through life with a sparkling smile and a handsome man who took her hand and made her spin, spin, spin. For a glorious moment it was clear that clothes, not fate, made her life" (278).

Though, Nazneen starts developing self-love gradually, yet she has an intense love for her family. At no cost would she abandon them, be it her sister, daughters, or Chanu. She always insists on helping Hasina despite the fact that Chanu never understands the love she has for her sister. She starts working from home in order to save some money for going back to Bangladesh. She also saves money and sends to Hasina. She also knows that the decision to go back would prove the worst for her elder daughter, Shahana, because she will never be able to adjust in the regressive society of Bangladesh. She thinks, "Dhaka would be a disaster. Shahana would never forgive her. Chanu would be finished. It was not even going home. She had never been there" (426). She tries to protect her family in every possible way. The Nazneen, who could not step out of her Block without someone's assistance, leaves no place unsearched in the whole Brick Lane when Shahana runs away from home. The area is ablaze due to the tension arisen by the incident of Twin Towers in New York. Still, she is not scared. The only thing on her mind is her daughter's safety. Despite the policemen and Karim asking her to go back home, she does not leave, and insists on finding Shahana through the chaos which she eventually does. She even helps a man to save himself who is sitting in the middle of the road and praying amidst chaos. She comments on the blind faith that he has in prayer, "Allah does not want your prayer now. He wants you to save yourself" (471). This shows a tremendous change in Nazneen's character who could never even talk to a stranger, now guides someone to save his life.

Nazneen's idea of love shatters when she overhears Chanu describing her to one of his relatives over phone, "She is an unspoiled girl. From the village . . . No I would not say so. Not beautiful, but not so ugly either . . . All things considered I am satisfied. And a blind uncle is better than no uncle . . . and what's more, she is a good worker" (23). And she instantly knows that he does not love her. When she hears things about love from Hasina, she wonders what love might be like. She wants to have a taste of it. That seems to be the reason of her falling into an extra-marital affair with Karim because his very appearance in front of her excites him. She also finds a partner in him who shares his world with her and lets her enter into it. With Chanu, the sexual act seems to her like more an act of obedience which a woman has to do for her husband, but with Karim, her relation is driven by passion. She actually tastes love when she is with him. She liked him because she thought that he was very sure of himself and his place in the world, unlike herself, Chanu, and Hasina.

However, gradually she realizes that even Karim is not sure of himself and he too does not claim his own specific space in the world. He is also struggling for it just like all of them. She thinks,

He was who he was. Question and answer. The same as her. Maybe not even that. Karim had never even been to Bangladesh. Nazneen felt a stab of pity. When he spoke in Bengali, he stammered. Why had it puzzled her? She saw only what she wanted to see. Karim did not have his place in the world. That was why he defended it. (448-9).

She decides to break up her relation from him because he was not what she thought he was. Moreover, like Chanu, Karim too sees a sophisticated Bengali wife in Nazneen. Ali writes, "How did he see her? The real thing, he said. She was his real thing. A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her" (454). Initially she feels that it is very difficult for her to end this affair but as she approaches him, she finds a new courage in her to admit the reality to him and make him understand her point. When Karim points out that she does not wish to continue because like him she too believes that they have committed a sin, she immediately responds, "Oh Karim, that we have already done. But always there was a problem between us. How can I explain? I wasn't me and you weren't you. From the very beginning to the very end, we didn't see things. What we did – we made each other up" (455).

Finally, the most important aspect of the novel is Nazneen's struggle to establish an independent identity of her own. The novelist intricates Nazneen's journey to self-consciousness beautifully. She develops from a meek and subdued character who cannot even talk to people easily into a womanist who finds her own place in the world eventually. When she comes to know that her sister has become homeless in Bangladesh, she is so pained with this fact that she suddenly finds a tinge of revenge in her and she walks out of her flat for the first time, without having any idea of where to go. She gets lost. But in the evening she reaches home safely before Chanu. She gets furious when he responds negatively about finding her sister. Her heart is ablaze and she thinks loudly, "*Anything is possible*. She wanted to shout it. Do you know what I did today? I went inside a pub. To use the toilet. Do you think I could do that? . . . And to get home again I went to a restaurant. I found a Bangladeshi restaurant and asked directions. See what I can do" (63).

Nazneen's life is very much affected by Hasina and her kicking-the-fate nature. Hasina becomes a symbol of what is missing in Nazneen's life. She too wants to have a taste of love and independence like Hasina. Nazneen admires her sister for her audaciousness towards life. "Whenever she got a letter from Hasina, for the next couple of days she imagined herself an independent woman too" (94). She is also influenced by Razia's nature. It is under her influence that she starts working. Razia gives wings to Nazneen's desire for learning English and knowing the world.

Nazneen even confronts Mrs. Islam who a very influential old lady. Nobody dares to oppose the matriarch. However, Nazneen is the only person who retaliates to Mrs. Islam's oppressive behavior. Nazneen is very possessive about her son. When Mrs. Islam wants to take Raqib with her for a while, she, unable to bear any departure from her son, speaks up authoritatively, "He's staying here with me" (88). Motherhood has bestowed Nazneen with a new power. Raqib looks at her face with a pleasant astonishment always. She feels that he sees a beauty in her which is never seen by anyone else. Moreover, she feels very useful for him. When he cries, she asks him playfully, "Do you cry for me? Is it me? Do you cry for me?" (86) When he falls ill, she feels a ferocious energy inside her. It is here that she believes that her mother's idea that everything should be left to fate, is wrong. She fights for her son's life. She takes him to the hospital and cares for him day and night. For a short while, he comes back to life. She feels thrilled at her agency to fight: "What had made her so happy? . . . I fought for him . . . Not accepting. Fighting" (142). The inevitable death of her son breaks her apart for a short while but she keeps courage and comes back to life with energy, and thereafter becomes the mother of two daughters, for whose happiness and rights she does everything she never imagined herself to be doing. Her decision to stay back in UK when Chanu leaves for Bangladesh at the end of the novel is taken as much for her daughters as for herself.

At another instance, when Mrs. Islam comes to collect her debt, Nazneen confronts her by saying that they have already paid more than they had borrowed. Mrs. Islam's son even threatens her by breaking the things in her house, but she is filled with endless courage that day. She declines to pay even a single penny as interest. When Mrs. Islam refuses to admit that she charges any interest, Nazneen deals with her iron-handedly and tells her to swear on Quran, "Not interest? Not a usurer? Let's see then. Swear it" (444-5). Most importantly, when Mrs. Islam threatens Nazneen that she may tell Chanu about her affair with Karim, she remains fearless and says "My husband knows everything. He'll come soon. Why don't you ask him?" (445) This kind of bold attitude shows that Nazneen has developed full faith in her own self. She is not even scared that Chanu might come to know about her affair. She is ready to tackle this as well.

Initially, Nazneen never answers back to her husband. She hardly knows the things he speaks of. Her response is not even required most of the times. Even if she disagrees, she never says it. Instead she always says, "If you say so, husband" (99). However, gradually, she feels that she has come to know Chanu better and has gained some knowledge of things. She starts challenging his knowledge of things. She starts answering back. For instance, when he says that it is not good for Bangladeshis to mix with Sylhetis who are considered inferior to them, she very subtly reminds him the name of their two National heroes who came from Sylhet. She is also inwardly against Chanu's idea of forcing the children to speak in Bengali all the time. The use of English is not allowed at home. But whenever Chanu is not there, she never forbids Shahana and Bibi from speaking English.

Also, when Shahana wants to go to the March and Chanu denies it, Nazneen, for the first time in her life, takes a decision for her children. She shouts, "I say she can go" (349). Her behavior comes as a shock to everyone. She also shows her power to Shahana when she very boldly questions her, "And shouldn't you be spending some time with your schoolbooks?" (349) From that moment, she actually starts asserting herself in her home. Nazneen feels power arising from within. When Chanu describes a research by some professors of London School of Economics which claims Bangladeshis to be the happiest people on Earth, she responds, "No. I don't believe this survey. What kind of professors are these?" (351) Chanu is shocked at her answer. He tries to show her the proof but she says, "It may be written down. But I don't believe it" (351). She claims that her sister has been very unhappy, therefore, Bangladesh cannot be the happiest nation in the world. At that moment she tells him everything that Hasina has gone through during the past years.

She always used to hide Hasina's letters from Chanu because she was always afraid that he might find fault with his sister only and that will also create troubles for her own family life. But this new Nazneen is not scared of facing the reality any more. She finds power within her to decide her own fate. At the end of the novel, she takes the decision of staying back in England. She knows that Chanu cannot stay; still she is ready to live on her own with her daughters. After her affair with Karim, she has come to know that she does not need a man in her life to complete her. She will make things right for her daughters and herself. She tells Chanu, "No. I can't go with you" (478). Later on, she tells her daughters, "... we'll decide what to do. Staying or going, it's up to us three" (480). Thereafter, she decides to do all the things on her own and taking the decisions of her life herself. She plunges into life with great vigor and enthusiasm.

Nazneen, undoubtedly, belongs to third category of women in Walker's three cycles that do not assimilate in the culture of the Diaspora by leaving their ethnicity and cultural values. Though at times Nazneen feels that the sari she wears strangulates her existence, yet she overcomes these feelings and finds the real meaning of liberation. At the end of the novel, when she is taken for ice-skating by Razia and her daughters, she comments, "But you can't skate in a sari" (492), to which Razia's reply establishes the fact that you do not have to abandon your own culture and values in order to assimilate into the culture of the Diaspora. You can do so even while retaining your previous self. She says, "This is England. You can do whatever you like" (492). This statement, being the last statement of the novel, too serves as Monica Ali's view of the Diaspora that most of the times Diaspora provides a space to women which their own countries never allow women to have.

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