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CHANGING CONTOURS OF DIASPORA AND DIASPORIC IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

This age of globalization and its continuously changing social, economic and political conditions have rendered the views and concerns about interpreting migration in terms of uprootedness, homelessness and fractured consciousness as obsolete to a large extent. Moreover, in contemporary scenario, the impact of globalisation on diasporic identities has resulted in astonishing ethnic and cultural exchanges and development of transnational ties and bonds. This feature necessitates going beyond the focus on gloomy aspect of 'diaspora' and to further examine the changing contours of diasporic identities. The present paper aims to analyse the implications of the concept of diaspora that has developed over the past few years and to discuss the need to rethink and redefine the ways it has been studied so far. In this paper an attempt is also being made by analyzing *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali to highlight that sometimes these homelands can also become a foreign place for which no desire to visit or return is felt, as the hostlands which seem to be so hostile and alien in the beginning gradually become a place of permanent existence for the immigrant.

A large scale movement of migrants, whether forced or voluntary, has been taking place throughout the world from one place to another due to various reasons ranging from economic opportunities, ethnic violence, and social and political compulsions. These movements have repeatedly drawn the attention of theorists and writers throughout the globe. However, this age of globalization and its continuously changing social, economic and political conditions have rendered the views and concerns about interpreting migration in terms of uprootedness, homelessness and fractured consciousness as obsolete to a large extent. Moreover, in contemporary scenario, the impact of globalisation on diasporic identities has resulted in astonishing ethnic and cultural exchanges and development of transnational ties and bonds. This feature necessitates going beyond the focus on gloomy aspect of 'diaspora' and to further examine the changing contours of diasporic identities who are continuously trying "to recreate, reinvent and reproduce themselves anew" (Hall 235).

The present paper aims to analyse the implications of the concept of diaspora that has developed over the past few years and to discuss the need to rethink and redefine the ways it has been studied so far. The paper will also explore how the diasporic identities undergo various transformations as projected by Monica Ali in her novel *Brick Lane* (2003). In this novel, she depicts the Bengali diasporas living in the U.K. trying to relocate and assimilate themselves in alien environments. While discussing about diasporas, it is generally perceived that once uprooted, the diasporas have to live with a sense of uprootedness forever, as their homelands stand only

for a place 'always longed for'. However, in this paper an attempt is being made to highlight that sometimes these homelands can also become a foreign place for which no desire to visit or return is felt, as the hostlands which seem to be so hostile and alien in the beginning gradually become a place of permanent existence for the immigrant.

The term 'diaspora' which initially was used in connection with the exile of the Jews from their homeland Palestine, is now being used to include all types of migrants and their migration, whether forced or voluntary, from their homelands to other transnational lands and within the nation. In order to understand its changing implications with the passage of time, it is necessary to discuss the views presented by scholars and theorists in this field. Throwing light on the concept of diaspora, William Safran in his essay "Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" pertinently observes that only that group can be called a 'diaspora' in which there is a dispersal of people "from an original center" to "two or more foreign regions" and who keep on maintaining a "collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland" (qtd. in Vertovac 7). He further asserts that, for being diaspora, they should remain alienated in host society by having a desire to return to "their ancestral home" (qtd. in Vertovac 7). These features which are known as forerunners of the concept of diaspora have been modified by Robin Cohen, who with the intention to move away from the definitions based on the paradigm of Jewish experiences, stresses that "the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism" can also be one of the common features of the concept of diaspora (*Global Diasporas* 26). Believing the term etymologically to be more positive, he further expresses that "it is because of a degree of anxiety in diasporas that they are motivated for achievements" (24) which is obvious from the various accomplishments of diasporas in different parts of the world than of those living in their homelands. Arguing further on this phenomenon, Khachig Tololyan in his essay "Rethinking Diaspora: Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment" states that one's continuous practice and one's development of "diasporic consciousness" makes a person "diasporan" (30). Adding to the idea of "diasporic consciousness," Robin Cohen avers that "[a] strong tie to the past or a block to assimilation in the present and future must exist in order to permit a diasporic consciousness to emerge or to be retained" (*Global Diasporas* 24). This "diasporic consciousness" can simultaneously be a sense of belonging and the awareness of not being able to belong. Further, this diasporic unbelongingness can instigate a strong desire in the minds of diasporas either for assimilation into new environments or for resistance to do so.

Many South Asian diaspora writers like Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Yasmin Gooneratne, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Meera Syal and a few others often write about a new diaspora which is "the diaspora of the border . . . whose overriding characteristic is one of mobility" (Mishra 448). In the same way, having been brought up in Britain since her childhood, Monica Ali has also observed very closely the changes in diasporic identities due to major historic-political situations prevailing in the U.K., particularly with reference to Bengali Muslims, which she has tried to delineate through the portrayal of different characters in this novel. Assimilation and acculturation are some of the processes which diasporic individuals directly or indirectly are supposed to go through during their stay in the hostlands. Throwing light on the process of assimilation, Christine Inglis in her essay "Some Recent Australian Writings on Immigration and Assimilation" states that assimilation can be understood as a "psychological process involving satisfaction, identification" which further includes "primary and secondary group contacts with members of the host society" (336-337). Whereas assimilation stands for "complete acceptance of the target culture and rejection of the source culture," acculturation process entails accepting the "target culture without rejecting the source culture" (Svensson 24). Acculturation allows the immigrants an access to the two cultural environments resulting in cultural hybridity which is not only the combination of two cultures, but also results in creation of a new translated identity. Whereas a few characters in the novel *Brick Lane* wish to belong to both the source culture and the target culture, there are some others who show resistance towards the host culture. There are also second generation diasporic characters in the novel who want to belong to the host culture only as they have assimilated themselves into the environment of London. Thus, Monica Ali seems to project in the novel that for some diasporic individuals, the diasporic consciousness becomes an impetus for assimilation in hostlands whereas for other individuals, it is a cause of resistance to acculturate in the same foreign place.

The discussion on diasporic concerns and on characteristics of diaspora by various theorists raises the issue that boundary-maintenance and the preservation of identity have been emphasized as indispensable criteria time and again in older usages of diaspora, whereas in the newer usages of the notion of diaspora, many scholars like Rogers Brubaker, Thomas Faist and Steven Vertovec have been in favour of a strong counter-current which “emphasizes hybridity, fluidity, creolization and syncretism” (Brubaker 6). Stressing upon the need of cultural hybridity for survival in a foreign land, Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin argue that “. . . mixing is itself not bad: in fact, intermixing enables certain cultural practices and ideas to persist” (85). This process of hybridization stands for the process by which the cultures around the world mix traditional arts and popular culture in such a harmonized manner that no loss of the past is there. By following this process, the diasporic identities knowingly or unknowingly undergo the process of change, which is slow but continuous. Although all diasporas tend to negotiate or form their identities between their new homelands and original home, differences may be seen over their affinities. Identifying a link between the changing identities of diasporas and hybridization, Robin Cohen says that “cultural identities are emerging . . . in transition, drawing on different traditions and harmonizing old and new without assimilation or total loss of the past” (*Global Diasporas* 131). Whereas one diaspora feels dislocated and compelled to adjust in new surroundings, the other may embrace the new culture voluntarily to “reach the final step of migration process which is to gain a sense of arrival reached by embracing cultural hybridity” (Svensson 24).

This notion of hybridization of identities tends to fuse the diasporic concept with the recent concept of transnationalism. The older image of migrants is generally perceived as deterritorialized, free-floating people belonging to “neither here nor there” but the professionally trained and skilled migrants going voluntarily to the developed countries in search of better economic opportunities during the late twentieth and early twenty first century are different from them. Under the impact of globalization, these people have now been able to produce strong “transnational connections that differ in fundamental ways from those maintained by immigrants a century ago” (Foner 360). Thus in the present scenario, the notion of diaspora can not be separated from the process of maintaining, negotiating, transforming and reinventing cultural identities which are always on the path of continuous change.

Monica Ali too in her novel *Brick Lane* seems to propose that by being far from the boundaries of original home, one can also have the vision for the transformation and creation of modern, contextual identities. The narrative moves around an area in East London, known as Brick Lane, which is a temporary interzone for immigrants who have not yet fully settled in England. Nazneen, a poorly educated girl, was married off by her family at the age of 17 years to Chanu, an overweight windbag and twenty years older than her, with whom she comes back to his small home in Brick Lane where he had been living for a few years before marriage. After being estranged from the boundaries of her original homeland, Nazneen keeps on craving for it in the initial years during her stay in Brick Lane. Always sustaining a hope of going back to Bangladesh, she, somehow, manages to live in the suburbs of London, but “the omnipresence of foreignness and the necessity of grappling with its influence render this act a creative reconstruction liberating it from circumscribed limits” (Banerjee 12).

Nazneen’s dilemma is to choose between the life of her original home by going back to Bangladesh and the life of British suburb since it is quite ‘strange’ and difficult for her to live in London with two grown-up daughters and an unsuccessful husband, who keeps on switching jobs one after the other for survival in this alien land. However, a change in her thoughts and life style begins when Chanu buys her a sewing machine to fulfill her desire to work, and the machine becomes a symbol of her emancipation. Ultimately, when Chanu decides to go back to Bangladesh with his family, she chooses to live in Britain itself rather than going back with him, as in London she gets the feeling of having a space where she can create “an independent and creative identity” (Banerjee 71). Cohen, while discussing about the migrants in foreign lands, opines that after a long duration of their stay, these migrants start feeling a bond of “language, religion, culture and . . . history” with other migrants and “perhaps a common fate impregnates such a transnational relationship and gives it an affective, intimate quality that formal citizenship or even long settlement frequently lack” (*Global Diasporas* 20). While living in London with other Muslim women of her country, Nazneen also starts feeling the same.

William Safran, Khachig Tololyan, Robin Cohen and other major theorists have shown the orientation or return to a real or imaginary 'homeland' as another important constitutive characteristic of the older concept of diaspora. But the theorists like Rainer Baubock and Thomas Faist are in favour of de-emphasizing homeland orientation. They opine that the return to homeland should be replaced "with dense and continuous linkages across borders" including countries of not only origin and destination, but also the "countries of onward migration, and thus emphasizing lateral ties" (Faist 12). Monica Ali too, through the portrayal of the character of Nazneen, has shown that in this new world, diasporas have not only changed but are 'perpetually remade' in changing circumstances and instead of feeling homeless, uprooted, alienated, continuously craving for a desire to return to 'homeland', they believe in accepting the new British culture without rejecting the source culture. Preferring to abide by the choice of her daughters to stay behind in London without her husband, Nazneen comes out as a migrant who successfully reaches the third step of migration i.e. "integration of migrants into the countries of settlement" after passing through the phase of separation and transition (Faist 13). Here integration may be defined as a course of action when, besides accepting the host culture and its norms and values, a migrant is also able to retain many aspects of his/her own culture and gradually feels himself/herself accepted into the alien surroundings. Nazneen's own sister Hasina, though she lives in Bangladesh, is always in a state of 'in-diaspora' as she keeps on changing home from one place to another and suffers a lot. However, realizing London as her ultimate 'home', Nazneen says at one point, "I didn't know that I was searching for a place which I've already found" (Ali 394). Victor W. Turner, viewing migration as a three-step process, remarks that after crossing the liminal space or the transitional phase consisting of various 'changes', a migrant reaches "in a relatively stable state once more" (45). Nazneen has also been shown such a character by Monica Ali in this novel.

The individuals like Chanu and Karim too have been portrayed in the novel as those identities who in order to integrate within White society adopt its practices and ways into their lives. Chanu starts consuming alcohol in the 'forced' company of other educated migrants like Dr. Azad, to claim himself to be westernized. Having a desire to become 'respectable' not only in the Bangladeshi community but also in the British, he wishes "to be a British Civil servant . . . a High Flyer, Top Earner, Head of Department, Permanent secretary . . ." (406), as Ali has shown him a person having great knowledge of leading philosophers and English poets too. Moreover, as an educated man, a caring father of two daughters, equipped with a pleasing thirst for knowledge, he hopes to get promoted to a high position in British administration. But the trajectory of change in diasporic identities is never the same for all individuals, as Jana Evans also states that "we are in a unique historical moment wherein different diasporic trajectories intersect and overlap" (12). Chanu's hope of coming to terms with new environment assuming that the host culture would also embrace him open-heartedly in return, changes into despair gradually, as he ends up just by being a driver only, and goes back to Bangladesh eventually. Faced with the racial discrimination and indifferent attitude of host society, these individuals start feeling a sense of longing and reunion with the original home and are compelled to "maintain important allegiances and practical connections to a homeland or a dispersed community located elsewhere" (Clifford 307). Thus Monica Ali has shown the ambivalent feelings of many diasporas in the novel.

While talking about the varied experiences of diasporic people, Robin Cohen pertinently remarks that these can be distinguished as "the 'solid' diaspora, marked by powerful myths of a common origin territorialized in an 'old country' and the 'liquid' diaspora, which is constructed through new cultural links and a substitution of sacred icons" respectively ("Solid, Ductile" 119). In the text, the writer also dwells upon these experiences through portraying Chanu's experiences on the one side and those of Nazneen and her daughters on the other side. After his numerous professional failures, Chanu concentrates on his sole and the last aim, i.e., to return to his homeland Dhaka and settle there permanently. However, relocating herself completely along with her daughters, Shahana and Bibi, in London, Nazneen is a representative of those transformed diasporic identities who have undergone diaspora experience defined "by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through not despite difference, by hybridity" (Hall 235). Moreover, throughout the novel, she remains connected to her home country Bangladesh too by exchanging letters with her sister Hasina and also keeps sending money to her from her small savings. Here, Nazneen represents a transnational identity who has adapted herself to a foreign

land and remains connected simultaneously to her homeland too. Hasina, on the other hand, is also an example of a transnational identity who remains connected to Nazneen and gets remittances from her time and again. To be a transnational identity there is no need of movement from one place to another, the writer seems to be corroborating.

The second generation diasporic persons, Shahana and Bibi, who are born and brought up in London, are shown not constructing boundaries like their father Chanu. During the process of assimilation, boundaries between the homeland and the hostland have been erased for them. Ali shows how, in the absence of their father, both the daughters discuss with their mother about his plans to take all of them along with him to Dhaka. Bibi asks her mother, "When will we go to Dhaka?" Before her reply, Shahana says, "If we go . . . we don't have to go. Do we, Amma?" Sharing rice with her daughters, Nazneen replies "we'll decide what to do, stay or going. It's up to us three" (402-404). Ultimately, considering London as 'home' for her daughters, Nazneen ponders at one point, "I was 17 when I came here and now I'm 34, so I've lived half/half, where is home for me? This is home, and this is where my daughters want to be. This is where I found my independence and my voice in my own ways . . . and I am comfortable with that here" (408). These diasporic identities seem to have transformed themselves a lot by following the process of acculturation and assimilation.

On the other hand, by portraying the characters of Hasina, Chanu, and Karim (who also goes back to Bangladesh due to increasing racial discrimination after 9/11) in contrast to those of Nazneen and her daughters, Ali seems to be raising a very pertinent question, which place can be defined as 'home'? Besides, if "home is a place of return" and also a "lived experience of a locality," as says Avtar Brah (192) then how far this is true for the people like Hasina, Chanu and Karim who never feel located properly at any place whether it is home or abroad, and for the people like Nazneen and her daughters who never want to return to their so called original homelands. Here both older and recent usages have been presented by depicting that the process of "migrant integration," "cultural innovations" on the one hand, and cultural distinctions, on the other hand may co-exist in the changing world of globalization (Baubock 13). The changing contours of diaspora in the contemporary context are shown transcending the old paradigm of assimilation. Rather than assuming the journey of migrants as unidirectional trajectory, i.e., a sharp break from homelands and a singular path of assimilation, there is an emphasis on the fact that the journey followed by the diasporic identities in the present world is "neither unidirectional, nor final . . . and . . . follows multifarious trajectories and sustains diverse networks" (Lie 304).

By portraying the characters of Nazneen and her daughters, Ali indicates that not the ghettoization, but the hybridization and acculturation are the necessary requirements for migrants in the globalised world to 'incorporate' with the host culture. Describing this process of 'hybridization', Lisa Lowe states:

Hybridization is not the free oscillation between or among chosen identities. It is the uneven process through which immigrant communities encounter the violences . . . and the process through which they survive those violences by living, inventing, and reproducing different cultural alternatives. (151)

Thus hybridization is clearly evident from the journey of Nazneen, who after being displaced from her homeland in Gouripur, Bangladesh and then even after the death of her son, copes with the circumstances along with her two grown up daughters and finally gets transformed into an independent, 'model' migrant moving from margin to the centre by embracing British culture, and ultimately becomes a successful hybrid identity. Ali has also depicted Rajia, a first generation migrant, who after her husband's death realizes the potential of her new home country and decides to live independently, which she starts by learning English and adopting western lifestyle. In the same manner, by presenting the second generation migrants, Shahana and Bibi, Ali has shown how, being born in Britain, their acceptance of its culture is more enthusiastic than that of the country of their origin as there are no direct ties with old cultures for them. Arjun Appadurai, giving his views on these changes, aptly remarks that in this world "both points of departure and points of arrival are in cultural flux, and thus the search for steady points of reference . . . can be very difficult" (42).

Moreover, the concept of diaspora, believing that for migrants the 'home' in original homeland no longer exists anywhere and they are left only with "broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (Rushdie 11), also needs to be reconceptualized in the present context. Linked to hybrid identities, it is

not only “back home” that has been caught up in the process of modernization, rather diasporic identities themselves have undergone the changes or transformation in various respects. Finally, after not being able to assimilate in the British culture, when Chanu reaches Bangladesh, his homeland, with a hope of getting a highly paid job, he has to compromise with a meager job in a soap factory. He is not properly relocated even in his homeland, as he himself is a changed hybrid identity now, after having spent so many years in London.

By depicting the linear and non-linear trajectory of changes in the lives of her characters, Monica Ali seems to be showing that for some individuals like Chanu and Karim, a sense of longing and reunion with the homeland becomes more fervent and the only alternative left is to return home. On the other hand, for others like Nazneen, Shahana, Bibi and Rajia, Ali seems to be showing the other side of the reality that the positive encounters can also reinforce the acculturation and assimilation with a new world which no more remains a hostland but appears to be a place called ‘home’. Emphasizing the reality of ‘change’, R. Radhakrishnan also rightly says: “When people move, identities, perspectives and definitions change” (123).

The development of new technologies in the field of communication and transportation has also attached new meanings to the already existing notions of diaspora resulting in greater mobility of diasporas to homelands. In a way, the trajectory of change in the concept of diaspora resembles that of the trajectory of change in ‘diasporic identities’ as it has transformed a lot in its meaning with the passage of time. Like diasporic identities, the path of change followed by the concept of diaspora has never been unidirectional, and in the contemporary context, “interpretations of migration . . . have given way to ideas of diaspora as communities of simultaneously local and pluralistic identities, ethnic and transnational affiliations and celebrations of cosmopolitanism” (Banerjee 7). In other words, along with loneliness and rootlessness, ‘diaspora’ also stands for ‘movement and dynamism’, ‘origin and belonging’, ‘community and culture’ in the present scenario.

Thus, instead of recognizing diaspora as a traditional concept relating to the scattering of people from their homeland to which they must return, in this paper an attempt has been made to study this concept as a “sense of belonging to more than one history, to more than one time and place, to more than one past and future” (Docker vii). In fact, the change in diasporic identities varies from individual to individual and is never ‘transparent’, and “instead of thinking of identity as an . . . accomplished fact . . . we should think of, instead, identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside representation” (Hall 222). Thus, Monica Ali in this novel has shown that after confronting many changes during transitional phase of migration and after living in threshold or liminal space for a long time, most of the characters like Karim, Razia, Nazneen, Chanu, and Shahana and Bibi reach a stable state in the end and may be called ‘stable’ identities. However, Ali is far behind in discussing the contemporary concept that identities never remain stable in globalized world and continuously remain in a state of flux, as there is no portrayal of such character in the novel.

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