

Power Dynamics: A Feminist Reading of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

This paper titled “Power Dynamics: A feminist Reading of Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*” explores the oppressive nature of socio-cultural roles, Language and Power dynamics aimed at marginalizing women. Using the theory of feminism and post colonialism this paper explores aspects of Power from Kate Millets “Sexual Politics” to debunk the power structure put in place by the patriarchal society and the concept of Subalternity by Spivak to discuss the double marginalization of Ali’s protagonist as well as the role of multiculturalism in the emancipation of women. The use of language and repressive structures stands as a different gender index used by patriarchy to enforce unequal power structures in heterosexual relations. While other critics have looked into female subjectivity in Ali’s *Brick Lane*, this research investigates power dynamics from a multicultural standpoint through diasporic experiences of two Bangladeshi sisters. Ali laments on the power structure in heterosexual relationships within the traditional Bangladeshi culture that oppresses and abuses women. It also explores Ali’s act of emancipation through the representation of women’s self-assertion; if oppressed women understand that the basis with which they are oppressed are not natural but constructed and that power is not gendered, the power women will be able to wield because of what lies “within them” will free them from the shackles of patriarchy.

Key Words: Power Dynamics, Patriarchy, Emancipation, Self-assertion, Feminism

Introduction

The discourse on Gender norms and cultural bias has been a prevailing topic in the literary milieu for generations. The society is male dominated which for Millet is an ancient and universal scheme that prevails in the area of sex. Men have established dominance over women as a result of patriarchal social constructs which they consider to be their birthright. Many Radical feminists have focused on exposing and dismantling this oppressive nature of socio-cultural roles, Language and Power dynamics aimed at marginalizing women evident in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Ali's *Brick Lane* investigates power dynamics from a multicultural standpoint through diasporic experiences of two Bangladeshi sisters. She laments on the power structure in heterosexual relationships within the traditional Bangladeshi culture that oppresses and abuses women. Kate Millet (1970) describes the relationship between sexes as a political relationship characterized by "dominance and subordination" (25). This political structure identifies men with dominance and power while the woman is associated with weakness and subordination thus giving men the power to rule over women. For decades, the power relationship between men and women is considered as the dominant and the dominated which has remained the statuesque. Millet in her book "Sexual Politics" states that, "perhaps patriarchy's greatest psychological weapon is simply its universality and longevity... Patriarchy has still more tenacious or powerful hold through its successful habit of passing itself off as nature" (p58). She criticizes this traditional gender norms by stating that the society is embedded with patriarchal power structures that purposefully limit female autonomy and agency there by reinforcing male dominance. This research titled "Power Dynamics, a feminist reading of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* will be divided into three subsections: language as a tool of marginalization, Systemic

Oppression and Self Assertion; multiculturalism as a tool of liberation aimed at exposing the repressive structures of patriarchal Bangladeshi culture as an indexes of female oppression and also unveil the extent to which multiculturalism contributes to women's emancipation experience. The fundamental questions that guides the analysis of this research is; how are women rendered powerless in Ali's *Brick Lane*? and how does multiculturalism contribute in the quest for freedom and emancipation of women in the text under study.

The fight for women's rights has been a continuous historical process since the proto-feminist Mary Wollstonescraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) reiterating the need for the establishment of women's rights. Millet (1970) calls Wollstoncraft's *Vindication* the first document asserting the full humanity of women and insisting upon its recognition. Simone de Beauvoir's path breaking work, *The Second Sex* (1949), equally represented a landmark that spurred the feminist movement. The ideas postulated by these authors ushered in the multiple feminist waves which have enabled significant rights for women globally. Monica Ali's novel has been reviewed differently by other literary scholars in terms of themes and Narrative techniques.

Noemi Pereira Ares (2012) in "The East looks at the west, The woman looks at the man: A study of the gaze in *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali" uses the theory of narratology with focus on the concept of focalization by Genette to examine the subversive implications of the narratological technique of focalization in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Relying on postcolonial and gender studies, the paper argues that in *Brick Lane*, Ali uses focalization to subvert the prevailing centrality of both the white western gaze — the "imperial gaze" as defined by Kaplan (1997(p)2) and the male gaze.

Furthermore, Yousef Tawfiq (2019) focuses on “Cultural Identity in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*: A Bhabhian Perspective” and explores the question of identity by making specific references to Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity, third space, mimicry and ambivalence. By looking at the way the major characters struggle to realize their sense of cultural identity in their own different ways.

Hassiba, Bekheboucha (2016) thinks in the same light as Yousef in “Cultural Clash and identity Remapping in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*” by analyzing the extent to which cultural clash can change the lives of immigrants who long for their roots and try to cope with the new life style at the same time. Hassiba opines that immigration creates a difference in identity that exists between the first and second generation which may lead to the creation of a whole new identity. The phenomenon of Diaspora in the postmodern century is affecting not only the life of Diaspora who struggle to accommodate into the fabric of host society but also the broader notion of identity.

The concept of power is investigated in both Meziani Ahlam’s thesis entitled “Silence and the Female Migrant Identity in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*” (2017) and Hadia khan’s paper “Silence and Resistance: A feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of the Female Subaltern in South Asian Fiction” (2019). They investigate the impact of the notion of silence on the female migrant identity in the light of Postcolonial Feminism with a focus on exploring the elements of female resistance that enhance women’s journey out of male dominance. It is worthy to note that while Ahlam investigates silence in two forms, that is, as both a means of oppression from men and as a strategic behavior of power by women, Hadia uses silence only in the light of oppression. However, the ongoing research takes a trajectory away from the two by taking into account language as a linguistic index of gender.

Arefin Tasnim in “The Postcolonial Feminist Struggle of Nazneen in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*: An Intersectional Study” (2022) and Pratim in his paper “Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*: A Feminist Perspective” (2015) read *Brick Lane* in the light of oppression. They identify that in *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali deals with women’s situation in an immigrant society and observe Nazneen’s life and her condition in a male-dominated world and at the end, Nazneen liberates herself in a westernized setting full of opportunity. They differ in that while Tasnim shows Nazneen’s oppression through intersectionality or the interwoven nature of systems of oppression like sexism, race and class, Pratim treats oppression only as patriarchy induced. The present research departs from these two by virtue of its use of language especially the tall tale as a strategy of enhancing gender construction and power.

Despite the fact that other critics have analyzed the novel from the cultural and identity point of view, this research differs in that it centers on Language as the major tool enhancing Power dynamics that causes female oppression and Multiculturalism as the tool for inclusion in Ali’s *Brick Lane*.

Language as a Power Index

Language is the foundation of human communication and interactions. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999) defines literary language as “A conspicuous departure from what competent users of a language apprehend as the standard meaning of the words, or else the standard order of words, in order to achieve some special meaning or effect” (96). This affirms the idea that the meaning of particular words is made standard by the users of that language. Thus language, can be constructed to suit the needs of a particular group of people. According to Angela Carter (1998), *Shaking a Leg: Collected Writings* Language is power, life and the instrument of

culture, domination and liberation. Language can therefore shape perceptions, control narratives and influence the social, political and cultural dynamics of life which some feminist have been debating on. In this light it is evident to acknowledge that language in literature is manipulated by patriarchal institutions like, culture, race and gender norms to oppress women. Since language is the medium for expressing culture, literature becomes a reflection of culture. Thus, Ali uses literature as a medium to criticize gender and cultural oppression of women by the use of media elements like the tall tale which is a symbolic representation that will go a long way to legitimize gender and power.

A tall tale is an oral form of entertainment that may sound true but is characterized by lots of exaggeration and actions that are hard to believe. Ali's tall tale in *Brick Lane* represents the psychology that influence the behavioral patterns of the characters involved in heterosexual relations. The tale entitled "How You Were Left to Your Own Fate" introduced by the oldest character Banesa reflects power imbalance in a patriarchal set-up and explains why things happen the way they do. It provides a rationale for the observance of socio-cultural roles and establishes the basis for sanctioning those who do not adhere to the roles by which they ought to conduct themselves.

"How You Were Left to Your Own Fate" is a tale that predates the female protagonist Nazneen. It is announced by the oldest character Banesa who is present at the birth of the protagonist. In the novel, the tale (though older than Nazneen) is captured through Nazneen's dream but with characters that she can identify. The tale shows the love relationship between Mumtaz and her mynah bird. After some years of shared love and inseparability between them, the bird changes and begins to exercise disheartening behaviors to Mumtaz. It begins to go out at will and return at will

irrespective of the kind and affectionate treatment received from Mumtaz who always stay home. The bird receives good treatment but returns the treatment with acts of hate such that Mumtaz even tags the bird “bad” and tells it to go away because her love cannot be reciprocated. Having caused pain to Mumtaz, the bird makes her laugh to forget her pain. She comes to a collective understanding and submits that the bird can only fly away or return to her depending on the will of God which is called fate. In the end, however, the bird and Mumtaz sort things out and live in harmony such that the bird never departs again.

In a gender-oriented perspective, language is used discriminatorily in the tale thereby drawing attention to power disequilibrium between the sexes (Ochieng, 2012). The principal characters in the tale (Mumtaz and the mynah bird) replicates the association between a man and a woman in a power relationship. It is said that when the bird chuckles it is similar to Abba’s laugh: “The bird...had a new laugh, a chuckle at the back of its throat, and when Abba laughed as well, they sounded like brothers” (218). Ali’s association of the bird’s laugh to that of Abba in the tale of fate is as a result of symbolism. She likens Abba’s laugh to that of the bird in order to show that the bird is a typology of Abba (a man). Nazneen makes this even clearer when she likens the bird and man in her statement: “Giving her love to a bird. Depending on a man like that” (218). In the same light, the bird’s consistent flying away symbolically points to the outdoor, dominating and sexual flirtatious role that men exercise and women are forced to accept. According to Millet “sex is known to be unclean, sinful and debilitating when it pertains to the female, but the male identity is preserved as human, rather than a sexual one” (50). The idea of the bird flying in and out at will signifies the man’s ability to do what he wants. That is why even Amma laments that: “waste your love on a bird, but it cannot love

you back. It will fly away” (217). On the contrary, Mumtaz is a microcosm of womanhood in a world of patriarchy. She is that perfect example of a domestic woman who keeps on bearing every torment from a man because of cultural deception and ignorance on her part. No doubt despite the bird’s behavior: “Mumtaz does not seem to know how terrible it is. She sang to the bird and the bird made her laugh” (218). This is a clear-cut portrayal of the patriarchal ideology at work because the bird (man) hurts Mumtaz (the woman) and then turns around to make her laugh to forget her pain. The bird’s consistent flying away irrespective of the degree of feeding and care that Mumtaz gives the bird reminds Amma to submit that the love shown the bird (which is a prototype of man) cannot be reciprocated. The nature of this tale indexes gender and conforms with the view of Dale Spender in *Man Made Language* (1980) wherein she notes that language is not a neutral medium but an instrument through which patriarchy finds expression. From a gender view point, the degree of unconditional care from Mumtaz irrespective of the degree of the bird’s constant flying away from her is a metaphorical representation of the woman in her oppressed and caring receptive role in a world ruled by man. For example, Abba and Amina’s husband leave home at will and return at will as opposed to the consistent hearty welcome always given them by their wives. Equally important is the idea that the bird's act of flying away is ordained by God which implies that Mumtaz must not complain because complaining means complaining against God. Men become a trap laid by God to test women’s obedience. Hence, in a metaphorical sense, the tale establishes the phenomenon that a woman is to bear all the actions of a man because that which the man does to a woman is naturally correct and any resistance against man by woman is resistance against nature and one’s destiny. This destiny of submitting to men is called “fate” in the novel. This fate

principle is transferred from the oldest character Banesa through Amma and to Amma's daughter through socialization. Amma becomes Nazneen's model and so even when Nazneen is exposed to a new culture in the metropolis, Amma appears severally in the figment of Nazneen's imaginations to reinforce this doctrine of fate. One of such instances is when she dreams a horrifying dream of Amma holding the hem of her night dress telling her that life is a test for every woman and that she has come to teach her: "how to pass the test" (322).

In another instance, Amma tells Nazneen that if God wants them (women) to ask questions surrounding their oppression, he God, would have made them men. As Millet states "Patriarchy has God on its side" (51), meaning only men have a voice as opposed to women who are voiceless. This respect for tradition resulting from a constructed tale explains why Hasina's irresponsible escape from her duty and tradition is presented as if her father lost a daughter: "...you would not know he had lost a daughter" (16). The tale puts the woman's passive behavior in constant check. Ali's use of a tale as a language ornament embroiders *Brick Lane* by shaping the novel to perfectly situate the woman as the oppressed minority. Female oppression becomes a "game" played by men. This is substantiated by Grindy (2011) who in quoting Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* holds that women's physical difference from men is the only difference and so patriarchs devise constructs (example, through tale) to oppress women "It comes from playing man's game to say that the woman is essentially different from the man. There exists a biological difference, but this difference is not the foundation for the sociological difference" (343). This implies that the pillars of male-female difference are far beyond biology and is therefore more grounded in social constructs. Thanks to the use of tales as a strategy, these constructs are designed by patriarchs to favor men at

the disadvantage of women. However, just as the tale of fate is told from one generation to another, behavioral patterns of men and women are laid such that from infancy, children tend to associate themselves with particular roles in daily life as they socialize. Alami in “Approaches to Gender Studies” (2016) affirms: “Gender creeps into our day-to-day life so smoothly that we take it for granted and accept it as a natural part of our lives” (1).

The use of tales in transmitting gender content and manipulative power pervades many literary texts. Achebe like Ali represents power disequilibrium between sexes using the tale about the Tortoise and the Birds as a gender index. In the tale, all the birds are invited to a great feast in the sky and because the Tortoise is aware of this meeting, convinces the invited birds to lend him some feathers to enable him fly with them to the feast in the sky. Having been deceived by the Tortoise sweet tongue, they lend him their feathers and go as far as making the Tortoise their leader and spokesman. Before the Journey, the Tortoise convinces the birds to assume names and he adopts the names “All of You” (88). So while in the feast, when any variety of food is served, the Tortoise asks for whom it is served. In reply, the answer is always “For all of You”. This wisdom permits the Tortoise to enjoy all the best part of the meals leaving the remains for the rest of the birds. This manifestation of greed angers the birds who withdraw their feathers leaving him upset in the sky. Having sent the parrot to tell the Tortoise's wife to gather many soft things and put on the compound so that he can jump on it unhurt, the parrot upon arrival rather reverses the message causing the Tortoise's wife to put hard objects. Since the Tortoise cannot see from such a height, he jumps and breaks his back into pieces. Its shell is only put together by the strongest medicine man, although the cracked nature of its shell remains unrepaired. The Tortoise is a representation of man while

the birds that are said to have painted their bodies with red cam wood and with beautiful patterns on them represent women. In this wise, man's wisdom employed in the manipulation of women is seen through the intelligence of the Tortoise. He is described as "sweet tongued" (88). On the contrary, the woman's mediocrity and oppression is seen through the Tortoise's (man's) ability to manipulate the birds and enjoy all the variety of meals. The tale therefore becomes a language index used by patriarchs as a means of subjugating women and appropriating customs to associate superior roles for men and inferior roles for females.

Through language, women's powerlessness and men's power is legitimized because language is not neutral. It is not merely a vehicle which carries ideas. It is itself a shaper of ideas and is programmed for mental activity which finds expression in physical action (Whorf, qtd. in Spender 1980).

Systemic Oppression

Women in *Brick Lane* see their passivity, pain, suffering and oppression as natural. According to Millet in *Sexual Politics*, "Patriarchy has a still more tenacious or powerful hold through its successful habit of passing itself as nature" (p58). The women have been brainwashed to consider physical and emotional oppression from men as a natural phenomenon. Women have been ascribed to subordination, care givers and maternal duties which infer physical weakness and intellectual inferiority. Oppression within the context of patriarchy also shows how the status quo limits women through structures causing women in *Brick Lane* to live in an illusion called a state of false consciousness as they think that what is, is absolute truth.

The use of religion as a tool of women's oppression back in Bangladesh is as evil as the way it is used as a tool of oppression in

London. Celestine Chukwuemeka et al (2016) quoting De Beauvoir in “An appraisal of women’s slavery in the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*” maintains that religion as an institution is not only an instrument of oppression but also deception; and this form of deception takes the distraction of woman’s attention from present injustice to promises of rewards in an afterlife. From the perception of Amma who is Nazneen’s model, she mistakes the social construction of men and women as natural and ascribes the misery that accompanies their sex to be God’s design. In fact, the use of fate is aimed at silencing the woman such that she can embrace every action from a man. Fate is misinterpreted by Amma to be a work of God which cannot be disobeyed. For example, in one of Nazneen’s reflections, she wonders about Abba’s unquestionable flirtatious attitude only to be replied by her mother: “If God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men” (80). This is instructive about women’s passivity. In another instance, Amma tells Nazneen: “You just have to endure” (323). In her opinion, she thinks she is a woman with assigned roles from God and fails to point out that the status quo is responsible for her painful experiences that result from tagging her “woman”. Thus, this belief that women’s plight is God-ordained makes their religion a pillar of oppression. The issue of women’s oppression is further strengthened by the construction of religious institutions. Having migrated and formed a Bangladeshi community in the multicultural British metropolis, religion is seen to loom largely within the Bangladeshi immigrant quarters. Since the Qur’an is a typical gender biased text that favors men, Chanu hardly studies it and rather encourages his wife Nazneen to do so. This is because he understands that her proximity to the Qur’an will render her blindly obedient to whatever he says and do to her.

Religion restricts women from walking out of the house, working at same jobsites with men and are even forbidden from attending meetings with men. This is pointed out in one of Hasina's letters where she says a group of preachers criticize them for working together with men in the factory. Men are supposed to keep separate from women. Razia Iqbal, another woman like Nazneen also faces gender-based discrimination in London. Her husband does not allow her to have a career. It is only after her husband's death that she gets an opportunity of employment to support her family. This idea of separation is reinforced during one of the Sharia Conferences held by the Bengal Tigers wherein the Questioner addresses men and ignore the women. When two girls draw attention to the fact that they have not been addressed, the Questioner draws a counter attention to them to the fact that the Qur'an bids men and women to be separate and that the women ought not to even be there seated among men. This treatment is not different from that received by women in the traditional meeting where no woman is allowed to speak. Th religious belief forbids women from sitting together with men talk less of contributing in discussions and decision making. As if that is not enough, the request of these two ladies for their rights to be respected is ignored. Religion becomes an inhibitor of a woman's self-expression because even when the married Nazneen expresses her sexual actions by her own will to Karim (adultery), she stumbles on verses that condemn the act causing her to live in guilt because she understands that the act is against what religion dictates. The religion then becomes a power oppressive tool. Given that men like Abba commit same adulterous crimes and are not disturbed suggests that the Qur'an becomes a set of rules instituted to force and silence the woman to stay in unfulfilled burning desires. So, while men commit adultery, women are not permitted to. Nevertheless, the hypocrisy of religion

becomes glaring by vice of the fact that Razia's husband can not feed his wife and wretched children but is set out building Mosques back home and base his arguments on the claim that when he is no more, the brick will still be standing. His action is rather a typical encouragement of the patriarchal institution through religion. God becomes a collaborator with men to manipulate and oppress women through a document called the Holy Qur'an.

The Muslim Bangladeshi patriarchal community in Ali's *Brick Lane* pay a lot of attention to dressing and this can be inferred through Arzoo the farmer who says: "You think a clothing is just a clothing. But as a matter of fact, it is not. In a place like this it is a serious thing" (377). Dressing is a serious affair because men use it as an oppressive tool. When Nazneen wears a sari and walks with her husband Chanu in the streets of London, the narrator paints a clear contrast in dressing to reflect different dressing cultures and the underlying significance for each:

A pair went by who were differently dressed, in short dark skirts with matching jackets. Their shoulders were padded up and out. They saw her looking and whispered together. They walked and laughed and looked at her over their puffy shoulders (43).

This strange sight of attire which Chanu calls "not respectable" because it is completely different from the dressing prescribed by his culture is a reflection of the freedom of the English women. No doubt they "walked" and "laughed". Ali lays emphasis on how and why the characters (female characters) dress the way they do. While the British women dress in skirts sometimes with their thighs and buttocks, the Bengali women appear in saris thereby representing them as active and passive dressers respectfully. Their appearance in the sari is not because they desire to appear as such, rather it is to suit the taste of their patriarchal Muslim husbands. This lack of

choice is a lack of power and so they find themselves in the mire of oppression as passive dressers. The use of the sari attire becomes very symbolic of what the female characters experience and represent. The sari is likened to a “python”, “a prison” and “chains” and these metaphorical meanings all boil down to women’s oppression. The sari reflects the subjectivity and oppression of its wearers. In fact, through socialization, the culture of dressing is passed from one generation to another as a way of maintaining a particular so-called “proper behavioral dressing code” for women. This explains why the sari dress and the behavior of passivity can be traced from the oldest character in the text called Banesa, to Amma and then to Amma’s daughter Nazneen. Men on the other hand are constructed as active dressers because no one defines their own dressing.

Millet in *Sexual Politics* states that “patriarchal societies typically link feeling of cruelty with sexuality, the latter often equated both with evil and power” (44). Amma who is Nazneen’s model, is described as a saint by her husband Abba on the basis that she accepts all the cruelty and torments from her husband without complaint. For example, she remains docile and silent despite his consistent adulterous practices. Because she is hurt and does not complain, Abba names her a Saint. Thus because of her reputation of passivity and stoicism, she is worn a sari at her funeral as a representation of the expected character from women and as a woman of good moral repute. Besides, Chanu at one point compares the sari to Nazneen by saying that she is as “subtle” as the sari dress. This is suggestive of Nazneen’s silence and powerlessness in a male dominated world. Since Chanu is a custodian of patriarchy, he buys her as many saris as possible as a way of encouraging her to always stay bound to the expected behavior. At same time, the Sari acts as

a cover used by men to hid the pain, they cause women. No doubt the “troubled bones” of Amma are always folded in a sari.

Nazneen is treated as a subaltern in London. Subalternity deals with marginalized groups who are unable to exercise their autonomy effectively, and who constantly live under oppression and subordination (Smith, 2010). She suffers double marginalization; first as a wife under patriarchal control and second as an immigrant “other” in the multicultural British metropolis where the British citizens see Bengali immigrants as a threat to their culture. A society where a pig is personalised and an immigrant objectified: “The pig sat...with his fat little legs.... She looked at Nazneen...the way she might look at a familiar object” (390). Glazer (1973) quoted in Kara (2019) holds that: “Migration...always create problems and even the best integrated groups suffer under such circumstance” (52). Nazneen cannot speak English, go out alone or communicate with anyone who is not Bangladesh. She is alienated from values necessarily as a human being because she is first a woman under a patriarch and secondly because she is an immigrant. While battling with patriarchal constraints at home, she also struggles with the fatigue derived from the new society and this places Nazneen at a state of double oppression. Nazneen’s inability to move alone is because she is under a patriarchal husband and a new culture that alienates her as the “other”. Beauvoir quoted in Abey (2021) says “What peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she, a free and autonomous being like all creatures-nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other” (29). In a feminist lens, marriage is essentially an ownership relation, in which men own women. Thus, getting married is betraying the human equality equation. In *Brick Lane*, women have no will of their own regarding marriage. Marriage is an institution where a woman lives in a house and not a home. The house becomes

a prison where women find themselves entangled in never-ending repetitive house chores. They are not allowed to work and their lives are limited to house activities. Nazneen weeps on her marriage day and nothing changes the situation. This explains why Nazneen wonders about what she ought to have done to escape her marriage experience:

If I had known what this marriage would be, what this man would be...! What? then? I would have run away, like Hasina? I would have eloped with the sweeper? Hah. I would have wept on my wedding day. I did! I did weep. What good did it do? (101).

It can be inferred from the excerpt above that Nazneen had someone she admired (the sweeper) but is given off into marriage to someone she does not admire and love. Her description of Chanu sheds light on her lack of admiration and emotional affinity to him. Peirera-Ares (2018) buttresses this by showing how Nazneen becomes faced with a painful marriage on the basis of marrying someone who is not her choice. The narrator exposes Chanu's most hidden defects in the eyes of Nazneen without any sense of pathos:

After a minute or two in the dark when her eyes had adjusted and the snoring began, Nazneen turned on her side and looked at her husband. She scrutinized his face, round as a ball, the blunt-cut thinning hair on top, and the dense eyebrows that crawled across his brow.... Now that they were close she could see the way the skin puckered up across the lids and drooped down to meet the creases at the corners. (39-40,)

Nazneen bluntly scrutinizes and exposes Chanu's body before the eyes of the reader and this occurs repeatedly throughout the novel as a sign that Nazneen lives with her husband just because her father

(a custodian of patriarchy) said so. The marriage institution places the woman in a position where she waits, receives and executes only the instructions from the husband. And coupled with the fact that all immigrants are the “other”, Nazneen becomes a victim of double oppression.

Self-Assertion and Multiculturalism as a Tool of Liberation

Foucault (1978) remarks that power is the source of sovereignty, and that power is used as a repressive means to control and rule people. According to him, where there is power there is also resistance by the oppressed minority. Foucault goes as far as to argue that where there is no resistance it is not, in effect, a power relation. It is therefore in the light of this power relationship that this section explores the representation of women’s self-assertion. Power disequilibrium becomes reversed with migration to London because of the absence of a patriarchal structure in the English host culture. Migration to the metropolitan London is therefore prime in women’s liberation experience by virtue of the fact that the female oppressed characters are placed in the midst of other cultures from which they learn and borrow.

Inasmuch as clash of cultures leads to the alienation of women, multiculturalism is at the core of women’s liberation experience. Identity construction is a key issue in post-colonial literature and in feminist studies. Citing Bhaba (1993), Lois Tyson uses the term “Double Consciousness” to define this reality as a way of perceiving the world that is divided between two antagonistic cultures: the culture of the coloniser and the colonized. Immigrants in the metropolis are placed at the mercy of the colonizer’s culture. Nazneen is fused between two cultures in which she is perceived as the “other” and so irrespective of the double oppression experienced, she ends up gaining freedom thanks to the power of the

host culture. The female Protagonist grows up all her life ruled by the principle of fate, believing that “What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne” (16). This thing that she thought could not be changed about her that was the basis of her suffering is her being fated with the female sex. She believes that she is a woman by destiny but fails to understand that her being a woman is a construction by society not God or nature. Irrespective of the fact that she is being looked upon as the “other”, at a point in her life, her exposure and experience of the foreign culture enable her to realize that there are other women like the tattoo lady who are not bound with the same belief with which she is bound. This causes reason to grab hold of her and some fundamental questions begin to pop up such that she soon realises that she could change that which she had to bear irrespective of the fact that something about her (her sex) “could not be changed” (277). In other words, she realizes that culture is a construct and varies from society to society. For example, she perceives that a change in her dressing in preference for the western cultural attire can shake off the shackles of oppression on her. She realizes that her dressing, which is her culture is what influenced and ruled her life (not fate). She gradually metamorphosed into this new culture thanks to her learning of the English Language which is a gate way. The impact of the British host culture, which is stronger, pushes her into not just shoving aside her home culture but using the culture the way she wants (not as a dictate on her by man). This is inferred by her skating exercise done at the end of the novel while in a cross-cultural attire. Razia on her own part clearly spells it out that she cannot continue to “take little bird's steps” and so decides to work and even dress as a typical English woman which is a total contrast to Bengali expectations of her. This outright refusal to even wear the sari is a clear fight launched by Razia in order to redefine her own

life by herself. Multiculturalism therefore becomes a key factor in the change of power dynamics because the new reality seen in a different culture propels a revolution that takes several forms as unravelled in subsequent paragraphs.

Ali's use of sex and pornographic images of women portrays the influence of multiculturalism. The woman uses sexual intercourse as a means of shaking off patriarchy control. Shenaz's idea derived from her stay in a cosmopolitan setting instils resistance:

There is another kind of labor we perform, and if we withdraw it that will be a discomfort only for the men.... A man cannot live without water. He cannot live without it, but he can bear the thought of no water. A man can live without sex. He can live without it, but he cannot bear the thought of no sex. This is my suggestion... That's how the women in my village got themselves a new well.... If you think you are powerless, then you are. Everything is within you, where God put it. If your husband does not do what is required, think what you yourself have left undone (65).

The excerpt supra shows an understanding of the inner feminine wisdom at work in the patriarchal society. Mrs Islam shares this anecdote to draw attention to a woman's worth. Like Millet posits in *Sexual Politics*, "we must first break those chains of our own making through our blind acceptance of common ideas" (p22). The journey of developing the feminine power in *Brick Lane* is determined by this anecdote because it shows the inner probing to determine what needs to be done. Yet, as a younger woman, Nazneen has to learn to apply this wisdom to obtain direct power. In addition, sex with Karim opens Nazneen's mind to the "power within her" as she

realizes for the first time that she has a “will” of her own and can make choices by herself for herself. It downs on her that the power of her will which she exercises in committing adultery with Karim is greater than that which she used in submitting to her father in marrying Chanu as well as the power which she used in submitting to Chanu as a husband. Her discovery of the ability in her to make decisions by herself becomes a nucleus from which she generates power and influence in her home. Sex with Karim endorses Nazneen’s consciousness that she can decide how to use her own body. Nazneen’s adulterous sex experience with Karim becomes radical, interesting and ironical when she ends up rejecting Karim with whom she enjoyed sex by ousting him from her life. This aligns with Chinwezu (1990) who speculates that women are the privileged group because their body and place are equally a source of power that can catapult them out of men’s dominion and posits that male uncontrollable desire for sex is one of women’s areas of strength over men.

Silence is one of the resistance instruments used by women to self-assert themselves in *Brick Lane*. Silence in terms of resistance is manifested in two forms. Through the absence of verbal arguments and through suicide. When Nazneen proposes to learn English as a way of fitting in a new culture, Chanu refuses but Nazneen does not dispute with him over it but goes ahead silently to learn it and her learning of English is a gate way to learn and live a new life of liberation. Suicide as an act of resistance is also clearly laid bare through Nazneen’s image of the woman who dies because she jumps from a sixteenth storey. After Nazneen’s arrival in London upon her arranged marriage to Chanu Ahmed, she comes in contact with Razia and Mrs Islam who become her new friends. Not long, in one of their visits, they parade the latest gossip about their neighbour who commits suicide. However, suicide being an

unspeakable act in Islam, they imply rather than state outright that the woman had taken her own life. It is inferred that the shame that comes with the lack of children is the basis for her suicide. That is, she takes away her life as a way of resisting the status quo because she is considered by the community as not being within the bounds of propriety and convention. Mrs. Islam states: “You have to bear in mind...she had no children ... after twelve years of marriage...It is a shame” (27). Nazneen remains silent during the exchange, but later, she mirrors the suicide victim through her thoughts when she opens a window and leans into the breeze:

The woman who fell, what terror came to her mind when she went down? What thoughts came? If she jumped, what thoughts came? Would they be the same ones? In the end, did it matter whether she jumped or fell? Suddenly Nazneen was sure that she had jumped. A big jump, feet first and arms wide, eyes wide, silent all the way down and her hair wild and loose, and a big smile on her face because with this single everlasting act she defied everything and everyone (40).

The image of the female body in flight depicted through carefully selected words sums up to the effect that the woman jumped on purpose. While Razia and Mrs. Islam focus on analysing the woman in terms of what society demands of her as a wife (childbearing), Nazneen analyses her in terms of why she commits suicide. Nazneen imagines the suicide as an exuberant act of defiance to the patriarchal status quo that is carried out in joy given that the falling woman had “a big smile on her face” in the course of the act. Ali frames the suicide, and Nazneen’s fascination with it, in terms of a body moving through the air. The woman’s falling body and the ice-skating lady watched on TV becomes a vehicle for Nazneen’s own

fantasies of freedom and liberation. The suicide functions as a device through which Nazneen can experience an escape from domestic entrapment.

Women's empowerment is key in inspiring Nazneen to write *Brick Lane* (Pavla 2007). Empowerment is the expansion of people's capacity to make and act upon decisions and to transform those decisions into desired outcomes, affecting all aspects of their lives, including greater autonomy which allow them to achieve their goals. It entails overcoming socio-economic and other power inequalities in a context where this ability was previously denied (Alsop et al 2006). Empowerment in this paper focuses specifically on empowering women because of the inequalities in their socioeconomic status. Grindy (2011) quoting Beauvoir argues that a woman's complete freedom depends on economic independence. She underscores that it is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent, to close the gap separating her from the male. To her, work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom. In order not to experience the effects that come with patriarchy, Nazneen gets economically empowered thanks to her exposure. Because her husband's plans never come to a fruition, she by her will accepts to learn sewing after which her husband buys a sewing machine for her. The availability of her husband who buys the machine, Razia who teaches her to sew and Karim who brings her work is critical in her empowerment. Empowerment is not limited to sewing. It extends to her ability to struggle and master from scratch the English Language that helps her interact around. When she learns of the destruction of the Twin Tower in America, it dawns on her that the economic centre is no more limited to the West and that she herself can become a centre through her work. Working even in factories like Hasina becomes an empowerment and emancipation strategy. Economic wise, the fall of Chanu is the rise of Nazneen. Mrs Islam

uses men as tools to enrich herself. While her husband is a middle man for her secret suspicious business, her two sons are used as thugs to terrorize those to whom she gives money on usury at very high profit rates. All these renders them economically empowered thereby limiting men's influence over them. In terms of political empowerment, during the "Bengal Tigers" Meeting wherein Nazneen is being invited by Karim, her vote changes the dynamics and makes a difference giving Karim victory. This action of hers give her more impetus to believe in herself that she can make a difference given that her vote influences the elections.

Unity of purpose is strategic in women's emancipation experience. Women's unity of purpose towards their freedom is exercised through community voice. Lanser quoted in Yuan and Dong (2018) opines that community voice is a term about a spectrum of practices that articulate either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority. The struggle for women to gain voice contribute to women's emancipation. Even when female individuals speak, they speak as prototypes of all marginalised and silenced women. For example, looking at the two ladies in the sharia conferences who appeal for a fight for women's rights and sex education, their plight epitomizes the plight of women as a whole in their patriarchal world. According to Susan Lancer, their voice is the voice of all women shouting out and advocating for a change. In the same light, during the traditional meeting where a group of women sit apart isolated and only listen, the women decide to scream which scatters the men disorderly. This collective action of screaming is a way of asserting themselves through speech which is associated to power. Their action symbolizes a yearning to be part of the decision-making team in the community.

Conclusion

This paper which is built on the subject of power dynamics uses the feminist concept of power by Kate Millet and the post-colonial concept of Subalternity by Spivak to excavates and lay bare the issues of patriarchy against women. Subtitle one explored language as a power index that aids men in their violent act of dominance upon women. the second section looked into Systematic oppression which discusses how the Bangladeshi religious system encourages the oppression of women. The men think it is their God given right to dominate women while the women think subordination and compliance is their natural design. The third sub section, Self-assertion and multiculturalism as a tool of liberation seeks to bring to light a solution or an emancipation plan for the women who after immigrating to the diaspora learn how to assert themselves and find freedom from the traditional system. The thematic and theoretical approaches employed in the analysis of this research points to the findings that the repressed woman under a system of patriarchy can be freed from her constraints thanks to multiculturalism.

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