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Pandemic, Precarity, and Return: Reappraising Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* through Reverse Migration

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Abstract

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* takes on renewed significance when viewed through the lens of COVID-19 pandemic, chiefly in the context of reverse migration. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis which triggered a massive reverse migration phenomenon as individuals/labourers returned to their places of origin; Ali's investigation of identity, belonging and cultural adaptation gains a heightened relevance. The pandemic aggravates existing prejudices, with Islamophobia amidst fears and misinformation. This chapter prompts critical examination of the intersection between migration, identity and the surge in xenophobia during the COVID-19 crisis, providing a timely lens to recognize and acknowledge the heightened vulnerabilities faced by Muslim communities in the wake of global migration shifts.

Keywords: Identity; Islamophobia; Pandemic; Precarity; Reverse Migration.

Countless workers migrate across states and beyond their homeland in search of employment and improved prospects. They have to leave behind their families who depend on their earnings. Uprooted and displaced, these migrant workers are prone to socio-psychological alienation. This sense of alienation or lack of belongingness emanates from abandonment by the local community and pressure of responsibility towards their vulnerable families for whom the migrant is usually the sole bread earner.

During seventeenth century, Bangladesh had to face the harrowing experience of poverty resulting from Bangladeshi Liberation War, post-war crisis and natural disaster like cyclones. With a view to escaping this misera-

ble plight, a significant number of Bangladeshi communities, particularly from the Sylhet district of Bangladesh, immigrated into United Kingdom in numbers with the hope for a better living. Initially, they worked mostly as labourers in cargo ships. Gradually they started residing in industrial areas like Spitalfields and Brick Lane to avail of better-paid employment opportunities. Owing to economic decline in United Kingdom in the mid-1970s, these Bangladeshi communities started opening restaurants known as "curry houses" all over the places. This venture of restaurant business boosted their financial status and standard of living.

However, what came as a blow to such Bangladeshi Muslim migrants is the manner in which the mainstream Western discourse began stereotyping Islam as a religion associated with terrorism. The stigmatization, particularly after 9/11 and the 7/7 London bombings, gave rise to a global wave of Islamophobia. The fear psychosis that accompanied Islamophobia permeated public and private life, casting a shadow of suspicion over the daily experiences of Muslims in the West. This is symptomatic of what Michel Foucault theorizes as "biopolitics," where state mechanisms regulate populations through surveillance, exclusion and control under the guise of security and health (Foucault 139). Muslim individuals increasingly found themselves subjected to heightened scrutiny in airports, denied housing or employment, and routinely profiled at security checkpoints. In Britain, the pejorative term "Londonistan" gained currency, insinuating that London had become a haven for Islamic terrorism. These narratives intensified institutional racism, resulting in the vandalization of Bangladeshi flats in Brick Lane and the alienation of 'Bilati Bangladeshi' youth from schools and public spaces.

In response, organisations like the Bangladeshi Youth Movement emerged as grassroots resistance forces, contesting xenophobic aggression and asserting migrant rights. The experiences of British Bangladeshi communities in such contexts embody what Stuart Hall describes as the diasporic condition—a space of "living with through difference" that is marked by cultural dislocation and political struggle (Hall 402). This condition is further complicated by Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, where migrants inhabit an in-between space, neither fully assimilated nor wholly apart, and negotiating identities under pressure from dominant cultural narratives (Bhabha 112). While hybridity can help different cultures interact and find common ground, in this case it shows how these mixed identities are sometimes used to justify discrimination and make people feel like outsiders.

Critical Race Theory also looks at how certain ways of portraying things—like linking disease to race—are used to unfairly blame and label communities of colour as problems. For instance, sickle-cell anaemia is frequently branded as an African disease, despite its prevalence across the Mediterranean and South Asia due to ecological factors like malaria. Such reductive racial profiling reflects what critical race theory scholars argue is a systemic tendency to frame race as a biological determinant rather than a social construct (Delgado and Stefancic 20). During the COVID-19 pandemic, similar racial stereotyping re-emerged. Social media platforms were inundated with disinformation targeting Muslims—videos of congregational prayers were misleadingly circulated to portray them as violators of public health norms. These digital campaigns weaponized Islamophobic narratives, constructing Muslims as vectors of disease.

Ultimately, these hostile environments illustrate the pernicious intersection of biopolitics, racism, and postcolonial marginalization. The resultant conditions—dispossession, disfranchisement, and even death—demand a critical re-evaluation of both the representational and lived realities of diasporic Muslim communities in Britain. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, in this light, serves not merely as a fictional narrative but as a powerful commentary on the structural violences endured by migrant populations caught between cultural hybridity and institutional neglect.

In the wake of collapsing economies, unemployment due to lockdown and health scare coupled with hate speeches and racial harassments; migrant workers feel more compelled to return to their roots. With the mere hope of sustaining with respect and care amongst near ones, workers across globe or within nation have ventured to travel back or are helplessly stranded at state or nation borders. An e-article entitled "COVID-19: Government must Protect the Rights of the Migrants during the Pandemic and beyond, UN Experts urge" notes that undocumented migrants or those in irregular situations experience heightened vulnerability. Often employed in precarious jobs without access to benefits or unemployment assistance, many have also been excluded from state-implemented social support programs. Concerns have been raised globally about the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on migrants' employment opportunities, leading to a significant decline in remittances sent to their families back home, who rely on these funds for survival. As a result, countless families are now facing extreme hardships. (qtd. in "COVID-19")

Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* written after the decimation of London in 1665 epidemic momentarily compels us to believe what Defoe

said, "The danger of immediate death to ourselves, took away all bonds of love, all concern for one another" (qtd. in Brooks, David). However, on the other hand Harish Trivedi's appeal of solidarity through literature shines bright with robust optimism, "Literature regards each individual with compassion. It may not fight off things such as pandemics, even as modern science sometimes can't, but it does become a source of consolation, a way of sharing our common humanist concerns" (qtd. in Ghosh, Avijit).

Migration results to uprooted existence and dislocation. It leaves a heart of agony. Both colonial and the postcolonial migration is essentially a corporeal movement across the globe, habitually in large groups. The network of migration is now wide-ranging. It has fortunately or unfortunately turned out to be a lucrative industry involving billion dollars. Both voluntary migration and involuntary migration have linked organisations in Europe to those in Africa and Asia. It includes slave trade, exile, dislodgment due to natural catastrophe or urbanization, human trafficking and ethnic cleansing. Migration stimulates the pursuit to reappraise the questions of national identity, national pride and cultural richness. It results into cross-culture assimilation and dissimilation. Migrants tend to be nostalgic. They keep on oscillating between their homeland and their host-land. It leads to no total identification and thereby results in socio-cultural alienation which gives rise to vested political, ethnic and racial alienation too. These discussions on migration and alienation mark the entry point to reread *Brick Lane* from the perspective of COVID-19 situation which was systemically communalised, racialised and even forced the migrants to be re-uprooted from their foster-land and compelled them to return to their roots.

Brick Lane is the story of Nazneen, a young Bangladeshi woman who was born and raised in Mymensingh district. After her mother's unnatural death, her father got her married to a much older man, Chanu Ahmed. She moved to London after her arranged marriage with Chanu. In London, Nazneen scuffles with homesickness and a yearning for her sister Hasina who remained in Bangladesh. Hasina's letters to Nazneen chronicled her life's journey. Nazneen's new life in London is restrained to the claustrophobic Tower Hamlets unlike her open spaces of village. Nazneen misses her dead mother, Rupban who taught Nazneen to rest everything on God's will and fate. This belief contributed in Nazneen's decision to accept Chanu, an amateur academic, whom she considers to be old and unattractive.

The concept of nation as a geo-political space is a problematic one. As *Bi-*

lati Bangladeshis, the residents of Tower Hamlets mutually share the task of upholding their religio-cultural values while sustaining in a country that straitjacket their Islamic doctrines as an intimidation to the Western world. According to Chanu, this troubled existence is the tragic predicament of the immigrant. Chanu was equipped with a degree in English literature from Bangladesh's reputed Dhaka University. He was certain that it would ensure him a prestigious lucrative job. However, failing to achieve what he thought he deserved, he had to work as in a local council office in a lower designation. Unfortunately, here too he was denied promotion despite his hard work and ready-to-please personality. His white male co-workers like Wilkie, on the contrary, ascended the professional steps swiftly. Wilkie always remain in the boss's good books and favoured with promotional benefits unlike Chanu. Raged, Chanu complains that white men like Wilkie are usually afraid of deserving people like Chanu because they stand in their way of success. As long as hard-working people like Chanu are below them, they feel that they are in hierarchical position. And if they see people like Chanu rise above their standing, they feel intimidated. Infuriated, Chanu left his job. As a last resort to maintain family, Chanu starts functioning as a cab driver. Employing the word 'function' denotes Chanu's helplessness and unwillingness to consider it worthy to be called work.

Chanu's professional failures have obvious connection to his status as a migrant, and that too a Muslim one. He does not take leaves in his work. He knows that his boss, Mr. Dalloway is a patient of Dr. Azad. Hence, he even tries to please Mr. Azadby inviting him for dinner. But when he is not promoted after all painstaking efforts, he sarcastically remarks that he must paint his skin pink and white in order to get promotion. This racial prejudice of the whites is even further corroborated when anti-Islamic hate speeches and sporadic violence were perpetrated by a white gang, the Lion Hearts. These extremists distributed anti-Muslim pamphlets in the vicinity of Tower Hamlets. Those pamphlets spread propaganda that Islam champions violence and are an arch-rival of everything that British culture stands for. Chanu is critical of England's culture which to him could not transgress beyond beer and cricket and of course colonialism.

However, that cultural alienation is solely due to the fact that Chanu intends to transmit to his daughters the trans-generational essence of national pride. He strives to acquaint them with Bangladesh's rich cultural heritage, esteemed artists and its remarkable history as a textile powerhouse. His youngest daughter, Bibi, listens intently, captivated by his words. However, his eldest daughter, Shahana, is obstinately pro-West.

She shows no interest in orienting about Bengali poets and singers. She is gripped to American pop. She prefers baked beans and ketchup to Bengali cuisine. She turns a deaf ear to her father's long coveted idea of migrating back to Dhaka with his family.

Chanu's idea of returning is not only due to England's racial politics in workplace, but also for the diasporic cultural tension that even other parents residing in Tower Hamlets go through. Their predicament is that they expect their children to cling to Bengali culture while their children lust after Western culture. The baffled generation falls prey to the pitfalls of Western culture like doing drugs. Razia's son, Tariq, becomes addicted to heroin. Razia is aware of the fact that Chanu's perception of Bangladesh being the panacea of all his troubles is delusional. In Bangladesh, Razia's husband used to beat her. He squandered all the money by giving it to an Imam, whose belief system Razia found objectionable. After her husband's death, she came to Tower Hamlets. She locks Tariq inside the room till his addiction subsides. When the sewing factory where she works shuts down, she starts her own seamstress business.

This perseverance is unlike Chanu's idea of migrating to roots in hope for a better future. To Razia, Chanu's idea of retreat is an act of running away from troubles instead of facing and amending. She is certain that Bangladesh has nothing more to offer than a bleak future. The fear of drug addiction and the possibility of love marriage compelled may Tower Hamlets parents like Jorina to send their children to Bangladesh. However, rather than finding safety, the children often faced greater challenges there than they would have under their parents' watchful eyes in England.

The prevailing problem of racism was further fuelled by the events of September 11, 2001 with the terror strike on USA's twin towers. At the meeting of Bengal Tigers, Karim admits that the West has become more vengeful on the Muslim community post 9/11. He addresses the issues of conspiracy theories being spread in Britain that Muslims are aiming to transform Britain into an Islamic Republic by dint of un lawful migration, higher birth rates and conversions. Karim also talks about anti-Muslims flyers being distributed by The Lion Hearts. In those pamphlets they have unashamedly insulted Muslim women for wearing veils.

Chasing unrealistic dreams of a bright future, Chanu migrated to London. His hopes are now dashed to the ground by the all-pervasive Western Islamophobia. Failing to strike a balance on the sea-saw of acceptance and denial, on the debate of occidental and orient or more specifically address-

ing the diasporic crisis; Chanu stoically repents, "I am talking about the clash between Western values and our own. . . about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. . . about children who don't know what their identity is. . . about the feelings of alienation . . . where racism is prevalent" (Ali, 116). With regret, Chanu tells Shahana that his professional experience in England feels like endlessly waiting for a bus, only to discover that it is already full and headed in the wrong direction. This analogy of a wrong-routed bus that never arrives resonate the unprecedented predicament of all the migrant workers who were trapped during this pandemic. Owing to the lockdown, they could not sustain in their workplace which were mostly shut resulting in loss of livelihood. Just like Chanu, they sought refuge in the past, unable to face a present and future that felt hopeless. Nazneen stays back with her daughters and Chanu migrates back to his roots hoping for a better future.

The reinterpretation of *Brick Lane* through the interconnected frameworks of migration, reverse migration, and Islamophobia allows for a timely revisiting of its themes in light of both historical and contemporary global crises like the pandemic. This chapter foregrounds how the Western political discourse has problematized Muslim identity. In this context, *Brick Lane* does more than narrate the lonely life of Nzaneen; it becomes a powerful literary site to examine the structural violence of biopolitics and the psychic toll of living within hostile diasporic environments. Recent scholarly readings—such as those by Yasmin Hussain and Paul Bagguley—have underlined how Muslim migrant subjectivities are caught between systemic marginalization and resistance (Hussain and Bagguley 402). This chapter supports these recent studies while highlighting reverse migration as a powerful act of resistance. It questions the common belief that settling in the West is always ideal and instead points to the other possible futures that postcolonial individuals can shape for themselves.

Contemporary analyses of *Brick Lane* have also begun to read the novel through the lens of gendered agency, urban multiculturalism, and neoliberal gentrification. For example, Claire Chambers discusses how Ali's protagonist resists the passive immigrant trope by navigating the dense intersection of religion, patriarchy, and global capitalism in East London (Chambers 112). In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, such readings gain renewed urgency, especially as minority and migrant communities have faced increased stigma and exclusion. The pandemic has reanimated older racial scripts, now through a biomedical lens, amplifying the necessity to re-read *Brick Lane* not just as a story of individual survival, but as a critical site for collective memory and justice. This chapter thus contrib-

utes to a growing scholarly consensus that literature must play a vital role in confronting the epistemic and structural violence against marginalized identities.

This chapter ultimately argues for a more compassionate and globally aware approach to literature and society—what can be described as a planetary ethics grounded in solidarity, mutual respect, and inclusive humanism. While *Brick Lane* is rooted in the specific experiences of Bangladeshi immigrant families in East London, its themes speak to much larger global patterns of exclusion, survival, and resistance. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and other overlapping global crises—such as forced migration, rising xenophobia, economic instability, and climate change—this novel gains new relevance. It becomes not just a personal or cultural story, but a space where we can imagine more just, empathetic, and sustainable futures. One of the key ideas this chapter explores is "reverse migration"—the decision or compulsion of migrants to return to their home countries rather than continue struggling in the West.

During the pandemic, many migrants around the world lost jobs, faced health risks, or experienced intensified racial discrimination. For many, going back to their homeland became a necessary act of survival or even a reclaiming of dignity. This trend calls into question the long-standing assumption that migrating to the West is always desirable or progressive. *Brick Lane*, read through this lens, opens up important questions about belonging, choice, and home. While Nazneen ultimately chooses to remain in London, her journey reflects a deeper negotiation of space, identity, and autonomy—an inward "return" to selfhood that mirrors the physical return of many migrants including his husband. This lens allows us to reappraise the novel not only as a story of personal empowerment but also as a subtle meditation on transnational belonging and postcolonial mobility.

By bringing together literary analysis and current scholarly debates, this chapter shows that postcolonial literature remains deeply relevant in helping us understand the long afterlives of colonialism—racism, displacement, and cultural fragmentation. It highlights how narratives like *Brick Lane* can speak meaningfully to the experiences of marginalized communities navigating today's crises. In doing so, the chapter contributes to present academic conversations by introducing fresh insights around reverse migration and pandemic precarity. It also urges future scholars to read migration narratives not only as stories of movement toward the West but also as potential stories of return, refusal, and reimagination.

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