

**SELF-IDENTIFICATION IN CROSS-CULTURAL SPACE: WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE IN
MONICA ALI'S BRICK LANE**

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Abstract. The paper deals with self-identification as one of the most topical problems in view of British postcolonial literature. Women's multicultural prose, being a bright combination of gender and ethnic discourses, gives an opportunity to form even more interesting ground for discussion. In this regard *Brick Lane* (2003), the debut novel of half-English half-Bangladeshi Monica Ali is particularly appropriate. Nazneen, a young woman, is in the center of the novel's narrative. At the age of 18 she and her husband Chanu move from Guripur, a Sylhetian village, to Tower Hamlets, a borough inhabited by the biggest East Pakistani diaspora in London. The novel covers 17 years, from 1985 to 2002. During the period described the main heroine does not only mature, take death of the son, become a mother of 2 daughters, but also finds her city and female self. The story presents a peculiar example of cross-cultural and gender issues' interaction which is reflected through the depiction of the female protagonist in search of identity.

Keywords: Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, self-identification, multicultural, cross-cultural space, postcolonial novel, female.

1 Introduction

Female multicultural prose presents a specific literature phenomenon according to Gayatri Spivak's opinion. Being an Indian American philosopher, feminist and postcolonial literature theoretician she claims the ethnic communities' representatives existing within an alien cultural space in modern megacities. Their female part finds itself in a deadlock, getting into them: 'if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow' [1]. It's important to note that the significant part of British immigrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, etc. belongs to a patriarchal society. Thereby, Spivak states that the female part of such nations does not have a chance for representation and self-identification both inside of their own culture with male values foreground and in the territory of megalopolises with a way of life absolutely opposite to the immigrant women's traditional one.

Thus to enable 'doubly subjugated' [1] heroines self-identification and to grant them a vote becomes the main aim for the female postcolonial authors. This tendency is brightly depicted in Monica Ali's debut novel *Brick Lane*.

Monica Ali belongs to the young generation of contemporary British fiction authors. Some prominent facts of the writer's biography let us claim that the symbiosis of national and cultural heritage form the hybridity of her creativity as well as of her own identity [2]. She was born in 1967 in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, in the family of an Englishwoman and a Bengali Indian. Her parents had immigrated to Bolton, England, when she was 3 years old; there she grew up. After school Monica continued her education in Oxford University studying philosophy, politics and economics. Later on she has moved to South London where lives with her husband and children to this day.

The manuscript of *Brick Lane*, published in British Grant magazine a year before its official edition, had aroused such an interest among the readers that Ali was taken for 20 Best Young British Novelists. In 2003 the book entered the Booker Prize short-list. The novel was filmed in 2007 with the famous Indian actress Tannista Chatterjee starring.

2 Methods

The paper represents an interaction of new and traditional literary analysis methods. Taking into account that self-identification is an underlying topic of multicultural fiction, the postcolonial discourse cannot but included in the research. Ergo, the female perspective of the subject mentioned demands to point out the gender approach, too. Also, it is essential to observe how the chronotope of the novel functions within the narrative space created by the author, revealing her main concepts and ideas. The related works of such prominent scholars as N. Bentley, Y. Hussein, O.B. Karasik, L.F. Khabibullina, S. Sandhu, G. Spivak, S.P. Tolkachev, etc. serve as the methodological base for our research.

3 Results And Discussion

The central topos of the story – *Brick Lane* – was poor and dismal place out of Central London for many centuries, 'a byword for poverty and violence [3] full of 'filthy cottages' [3]. The most part of its dwellers were indigent immigrants, appeared in consequence of the empire's fall after World War II. Ergo, *Brick Lane* and *Tower Hamlets* in particular have turned out to establish a new but a small Eastern town with its own laws, customs and traditions within a huge European megacity. This became the reason why *Tower Hamlets* turned into an unspoken Bangladeshi pied-a-terre – thus, not by chance the locals called it *Banglatown*.

The way how a transcultural space is created in the novel affords to speculate over the notion of hybridity from two perspectives. Monica Ali does not only describes the inner world of her personages trying to find a way how to

preserve their own identity as well as to adapt to new reality, what can be considered a well-established tradition for late postcolonial literary works [4]. As an author she also puts them into an in-between hybrid space as *Tower Hamlets* is. Thereby, one of the most interesting aspects for analysis is self-identification of the main heroine through her own perception of London's ethnic quarter as a new place to live in.

The marriage of young Nazneen and mature Chanu is not about love. Following the Eastern tradition her father decides to find a husband for a daughter. Being a dweller of a poor Bangladeshi province, he is guided by his neighbors' opinion, for whom Chanu, for over 10 years living in England, seems to be a wealthy and respected man. This delusive view of him has instantly ruined as soon as Nazneen turns up to be enclosed in four walls of his plain tiny apartment at Brick Lane: 'In all her eighteen years, she could scarcely remember a moment that she had spent alone. Until she married. And came to London to sit day after day in this large box with the furniture to dust' [5]. The girl doesn't even leave her house for the first time, not going beyond some short walks in a narrow yard. Her life, concentrated within a small kitchen is a typical tedious, monotonous routine of a Muslim wife: 'Regular prayer, regular housework, regular visits with Razia' [5]. For Nazneen her immigration to London is quite similar to removal into an absolutely different, extraterrestrial world limited by obscure pictures from the flat window. The novel's protagonist has spent the most part of her life in the bosom of Eastern exotic nature whereas sometimes urban and even miserable landscape of East End is alien for her. She compares contemporary *Tower Hamlets* reality where she has to live in with her native Guripur: 'You can spread your soul over a paddy field, you can whisper to a mango tree, you can feel the earth beneath your toes and know that this is the place, the place where it begins and ends. But what can you tell to a pile of bricks? A television aerial dangles from a window like a suicide' [5]. Despite the fact that the biggest part of the quarter dwelled by the married couple is inhabited by their fellow countrymen, Nazneen constantly suffers from loneliness. It's hard for her to adapt to these new places and people around. It should be noted that Brick Lane was originally called Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers. This alludes more generally not only to the distance between Sylhet, from where the heroine takes roots, and London, where she immigrates to – it also underlines the cultural distance between these two worlds [6].

Nick Bentley, one of the most prominent British scholars studying literature, observes defamiliarization as a narrative technique used by Ali depicting the protagonist's first visits to the city [7]. This notion has been defined by Viktor Shklovsky, one of the Russian formalist critics. He describes this technique as 'making the everyday appear unfamiliar'. When Nazneen is on London streets for the first time she sees them exactly in the same vein mentioned. This is the girl's view of the Bishopsgate business center, f.i.: 'The entrance was like a glass fan, rotating slowly, sucking people in, wafting others out...the glass above became dark as a night pond. The building was without end. Above, somewhere it crushed the clouds. The next building and the opposite were white stone palaces' [5]. The way how modern Londoners look like seems weird and bizarre to her: 'differently dressed, in short dark skirts with matching jackets. Their shoulders were padded up and out. They could balance a bucket on each side and not spill a drop of water... They walked and laughed, and looked at her over their puffy shoulders' [5]. More by token, the author creates a comical effect through the way how the main character compares modern city features that are strange for her with Silhetian village reality, that is, vice versa, her natural environment. Roaring cars on the lively Brick Lane are akin 'an ancient muezzin, ululating painfully, stretching his vocal cords to the limit' [5] to Nazneen. She portrays passersby using hands free as 'looked down at the pavement to negotiate puddles, litter and excrement' [5]. To cross the upbeat driveway turns out to be a real problem for the protagonist: 'To get to the other side of the street without being hit by a car was like walking out in the monsoon and hoping to dodge the raindrops' [5]. Even the Buckingham Palace causes an absolutely different reaction in Nazneen in comparison with Europeans. As for her, the embodiment of British power is not a nonesuch of true beauty according to Eastern national and cultural taste: 'If she were the queen she would tear it down and build a new house, not this flat-roofed block but something elegant and spirited, with minarets and spires, domes and mosaics, a beautiful garden instead of this bare forecourt. Something like Taj Mahal' [5]. Besides, we could not but agree with O.B. Karasik and I.V. Schepacheva, determined to state that 'the author's irony is aimed at contemporary tendency to celebrate multiculturalism and due to it, the formation of new social and literary stereotypes' [8]. So, the ironic depiction of the way how Eastern immigrants percept the contemporary megacity helps the writer to recreate their feeling of estrangement and isolation from European capital reality.

At the same time, the portrait of London urban landscape often corresponds to the main character's inner state throughout the narrative. Suchlike 'perceptuality' of the novel's chronotope 'becomes the way of 'female writing', observed in the contemporary world literature [9]. F.i., when Nazneen gets into the hospital with her ill son Raqib, she has a feeling that 'the city shattered. Everything was in pieces... Raqib... was the center. The world had rearranged itself around this new core. It had do... He was on the inside and all else looked in' [5]. When her son's life is threatened, it seems to her that 'the clouds, which rushed at the tops of the buildings as if they would smother them in a murderous rage. The buildings stood their ground, impassive as cows. And at the very last second the clouds went to pieces' [5]. Such passages do not only reveal the emotions and dismays of the protagonist, but also demonstrate how the character gradually self-identifies with the new place.

S.P. Tolkachev is right to notice that 'an immigrant's belonging is split between a 'hearth and home' experience and a 'street chaos', so thus, the cartography of their transition from one state to another is becoming the main objective for English postcolonial writers" [10]. This tendency is reflected in Nazneen's development of *Tower Hamlets* streets, what either symbolizes her transformation from a Muslim wife into a modern Londoner. She is overcome by desire of changing the traditional routine of an Eastern woman and becoming like everyone else. It is expressed in the form of inner protest to her husband who thinks that there is no need to come into the street alone or to

visit English courses for her. Despite the fact of spending a decade in London and British education, Chanu remains an alien in the European capital, a typical Banglatown-dweller, refusing to assimilate and constantly trying to reconstruct Bangladesh with its features and traditions in his own life and mind. That's why when Nazneen gets lost on the street one day, asking for help from a stranger becomes not only an act of bravery but a kind of a rebellion against her conservative husband: 'Do you know what I did today? I went inside a pub. To use the toilet. Did you think I could do that? I walked mile upon mile, probably around the whole of London, although I did not see the edge of it... I found a Bangladeshi restaurant and asked directions. See what I can do!' [5]. However, the episodes where East meets West and habitual for Europeans things are interpreted by the main character are full of the author's irony, it can be said that they form a unified chain of events, transmogrifying Nazneen into an Englishwoman.

It is also shown through the various events of the heroine's life, but the appearance of Karim, a young leader of The Bengal Tigers – a radical Bangladeshi grouping – becomes a turning point in Nazneen's self-identification as a woman.

Their love affair becomes the reason of Nazneen's inner conflict – being a Muslim, she was used to treat an adultery as a mortal sin. At the same time, only Karim makes her feel a real woman: 'as if the conflagration of her bouts with him had cast a special light on everything, a dawn light after a life lived in twilight... as if she had been born deficient and only now been gifted the missing sense' [5]. The male personage's belligerent view on a complicated social situation in London and active position of fighter for justice seems an incarnation of a true masculine power to her: 'He was a man, and he spoke as a man. Unlike Chanu, he was not mired in words' [5], in comparison with Chanu, fixated on returning to Dhaka and recollecting of Bangladesh.

Despite the fact that Chanu identifies himself as a contemporary Londoner: 'I don't stop you from doing anything. I am westernized now. It is lucky for you that you married an educated man' [5], he is shown as a carrier of Eastern values represented as regressive ones throughout the narrative. That's why it can be said that Nazneen's life space is enclosing by their marital relations. Otherwise, Karim is one who carries progressive Western views in the eyes of Nazneen. He expands horizons and opens a new world for the heroine, telling her about his grouping's activities, sociopolitical atmosphere in other countries and harsh circumstances in working quarters of East End. So that he is, vice versa, disclosing her space of living. [9]

If the relations with Karim become a push to outgo to the big city and to gain women's independence for the main character, for him their affair is, otherwise, a road to the roots, a way to regain his native bounds. He sees Nazneen as 'the real thing... A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her' [5]. The author portrays how the heroes 'made each other up' [5] seeking their own life place in the process of self-identification.

Nazneen's attitude to Karim is changing to the end of the novel. Despite the young man's proposal she leaves him realizing that their relationship has been built on the mutual illusive ideas: 'She had patched him together, working in the dark... and now that she held it up to the light the stitches showed up large and crude, and they cut across everything' [10]. Karim in his turn realizes the craving for native places and embarks on a van journey to Bangladesh, regaining the nexus with the historical homeland.

Finally, Nazneen makes her own independent decision – she refuses to move back to Dhaka with Chanu. The main character and her friend Razia start up a business in tailoring and clothing design. They begin to produce modern clothes in Indian style for women what symbolizes their new hybrid identity. Nazneen and Razia become the contemporary megacity dwellers preserving their connection with roots.

4 Summary

Monica Ali's Brick Lane represents the so-called female view on the cross-cultural space within London. The author shows how ethnic diasporas built separate quarters on the territory of megacities, representing their native land in miniature, what becomes the epitome of static Eastern culture where Nazneen is rooted in. Simultaneously, the Western values, represented through the lifestyle of London, body forth the opposite model of development, dynamic and free from fatalism. If one of the groups of characters refuses to assimilate and prefers existing in the insular, artificially created world of Banglatown, another one gets its own city self. The second variant of living in multicultural London is revealed through the image of the protagonist. Nazneen not only manages to find the ways of self-identification in British megalopolis but also realizes herself as an independent and free woman of modernity. Thus, the writer makes the problem of female self-identification in the transcultural space of English capital the central one in her book.

5 Conclusions

Therefore, Ali creates the image of London where just women manage to gain their own city self. The author leaves no place to the male characters in the narrative space of her novel. This typically women's ending of the story lets to speak about a specific concept of cross-cultural megalopolis image construction, inherent in some British postcolonial female writers' perspective.

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