**Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro**
Centro de Educação e Humanidades
Instituto de Letras

Julia Goulart Sereno

# Displacement and (un)belonging: the pathways of diasporic women in *Small Island, Kehinde* and *Brick Lane*

Rio de Janeiro
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Tese apresentada, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Doutora, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Estudos de Literatura.

Orientadora: Profª. Dra. Leila Assumpção Harris

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Rio de Janeiro
2023

**DEDICATION**

Às minhas avós.

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É preciso que a mulher se coloque no texto – como no mundo,
e na história –, por seu próprio movimento.
*Hélène Cixous*

## RESUMO

SERENO, Julia Goulart. *Displacement and (un)belonging*: the pathways of diasporic women in Small Island, Kehinde and Brick Lane. 2023. 162 f. Tese (Doutorado em Letras) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2023.

Esta tese visa analisar a sensação de deslocamento e a busca por pertencimento das protagonistas dos romances *Small Island* (2004a), de Andrea Levy, *Kehinde* (1994), de Buchi Emecheta e *Brick Lane* (2003), de Monica Ali, no contexto pós-colonial de Londres. Hortense, Kehinde e Nazneen migram para Londres por razões diferentes, vindo de três ex-colônias britânicas (Jamaica, Nigéria e Bangladesh, respectivamente) e em momentos históricos distintos. Em *Small Island*, Andrea Levy focaliza as expectativas e frustrações da geração Windrush na chegada à Inglaterra após a segunda guerra mundial. Em *Kehinde*, Buchi Emecheta descreve as dificuldades enfrentadas por mulheres africanas aprisionadas em papéis tradicionais em uma estrutura patriarcal. Em *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali revela os desafios da experiência diaspórica de uma mulher que migra de Bangladesh para Londres por meio de um casamento arranjado. As experiências de deslocamento e adaptação dos personagens são diretamente afetadas por questões relacionadas ao gênero, raça, classe, e etnia como constituintes identitários importantes. Textos de Avtar Brah, James Clifford, Sandra Almeida e Susan Friedman, entre outros, são utilizados para investigar a natureza da diáspora gendrada e a sua articulação com elementos espaciais e temporais. A sobreposição do pós-colonialismo e feminismo é estudada através da análise dos trabalhos de teóricos como Elleke Boehmer, Deepika Bahri, Chandra Mohanty e Gayatri Spivak. O papel crucial desempenhado pela cidade de Londres nas narrativas – considerando as diferentes cronologias – também é analisado, com foco na complexidade dos processos de mudanças culturais e sociais que a cidade tem enfrentado desde a intensificação dos movimentos migratórios, especialmente após a segunda guerra mundial. Textos de Doreen Massey e Saskia Sassen são trabalhados com o objetivo de investigar os efeitos dos processos diaspóricos e de globalização na configuração espacial da cidade de Londres. Os três romances exploram os aspectos multiculturais de Londres, revelando uma história de discriminação, resistência, transformação e criatividade. Definições de multiculturalismo e cosmopolitismo são articuladas com a discussão sobre as políticas migratórias excludentes presentes na Grã-Bretanha. Tais medidas restritivas refletem o pensamento discriminatório e racista da sociedade britânica contemporânea. O caráter fluido das identidades é outro aspecto que pode ser observado nas trajetórias pessoais das três protagonistas. Textos de Stuart Hall e Zygmunt Bauman são estudados e relacionados com as narrativas. Esta tese também é guiada pelo conceito de geografias emocionais, desenvolvido por Joyce Davidson e Christine Milligan. Ao revelar como os deslocamentos das protagonistas afetam a sua sensação de ser no mundo, essas narrativas transgridem as fronteiras geográficas de pertencimento, colocando o movimento, a instabilidade, e o processo de transformação no seu centro.



Palavras-chave: Londres pós-colonial. Diáspora gendrada. Andrea Levy. Buchi Emecheta. Monica Ali.

## ABSTRACT

SERENO, Julia Goulart. *Displacement and (un)belonging*: The pathways of diasporic women in Small Island, Kehinde and Brick Lane. 2023. 162 f. Tese (Doutorado em Letras) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2023.

This dissertation aims to analyse the sense of displacement and the search for belonging of the protagonists from the novels *Small Island* (2004a), by Andrea Levy, *Kehinde* (1994) by Buchi Emecheta and *Brick Lane* (2003), by Monica Ali, in the context of post-colonial London. Hortense, Kehinde and Nazneen migrate to London for different reasons, from former British colonies (Jamaica, Nigeria and Bangladesh, respectively) and at distinct moments in history. In *Small Island*, Andrea Levy focuses on the settling of the Windrush generation in England after the Second World War. In *Kehinde*, Buchi Emecheta depicts the difficulties faced by African women trapped in traditional roles in a patriarchal structure. In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali exposes the challenges of the diasporic experience for a woman who moves from Bangladesh to London through an arranged marriage. The characters' experiences of dislocation and adaptation are directly affected by issues related to gender, race, class, and ethnicity as important identity constituents. Texts by theorists Avtar Brah, James Clifford, Sandra Almeida and Susan Friedman, among others, are used to investigate the nature of the gendered diaspora and its articulation with spatial and temporal elements. The overlapping of postcolonialism and feminism is examined by looking at the works of scholars such as Elleke Boehmer, Deepika Bahri, Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak. The crucial role played by the city of London in the narratives – considering the distinct time frames – is also analysed, with a focus on the complexity of the processes of cultural and social changes that the city has undergone since the intensification of migratory movements, especially after the Second World War. Texts by Doreen Massey and Saskia Sassen are covered in order to investigate the effects of diasporic and globalization processes on the spatial configuration of the city of London. The three novels engage in exploring London's multicultural aspects, revealing a history of discrimination, resistance, transformation and creativity. Definitions of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism are articulated together with an overview of exclusionary migratory policies that have been adopted in Britain. Such restrictive measures have reflected the discriminatory and racist mindset in contemporary British society. The fluid character of identities is another aspect that can be observed in the journeys of the three protagonists. Texts by Stuart Hall and Zygmunt Bauman are studied and related to the narratives. This dissertation also resorts to the concept of emotional geographies, as it is developed by Joyce Davidson and Christine Milligan. By revealing how the protagonists' dislocations affect their sense of being in the world, these narratives transgress the boundaries of geographical belonging, placing movement, instability, and the process of becoming at their core.



Keywords: Postcolonial London. Gendered diaspora. Andrea Levy. Buchi Emecheta. Monica Ali.

**CONTENTS**

# INTRODUCTION

> We can never go home, return to the primal scene, the forgotten moment of our beginnings, and authenticity, for there is always something else in between. We cannot return to a bygone unity, for we can only know the past, memory, the unconscious, through its effects, that is, when it is brought into language and from there embark on an (interminable) analysis.
>
> *Iain Chambers*

> We live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.
>
> *Ben Okri*

## The power of storytelling: reading, writing and understanding the world

I have always been fascinated by the written word. At a very young age, I used to write my thoughts, my dreams and my personal experiences in a diary, which I carried everywhere. My teenage years were marked by exchanging long letters with friends, reading compulsively and writing stories and love poems to imaginary readers. Years later, when I started my BA in English Language and Literature at UERJ, I knew I had made the right choice on the very first day, after attending an inspiring lecture on Literary Theory. My work as a language teacher has always been influenced by my love for literature, which made me choose to advance my studies by enrolling in the postgraduate course in Literary Studies in 2007. I was back at UERJ again, a place I was proud to be part of. After I finished the course, Dr. Leila Harris, who had been my professor more than once, suggested that I should take the test to join the Master's programme in Literatures of the English Language. Under her

supervision, I chose to write about the diasporic experience of Nazneen, the protagonist of Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2003). The themes of dislocation, displacement and search for belonging that prevail in the narrative were as inspiring as the personal journey of Nazneen, a woman whose memories and dreams get entangled in her struggle to find where her home is. In my project for the PhD research proposal, I decided to work again with *Brick Lane*, together with other two novels – *Small Island* (2004), by Andrea Levy, British born to Jamaican parents, and *Kehinde* (1994), by Nigerian-British Buchi Emecheta. A careful reading of the three novels has allowed me to find many aspects of the narratives that are pertinent for both a detailed comparison and a deeper investigation of the female migrant experience within British society, taking into account the specificities linked to their countries of origin and the historical-political setting of each novel. The three protagonists – Hortense, Kehinde and Nazneen – migrate to London for different reasons and eventually need to learn how to cope with their feelings of displacement, their search for self-awareness, and their struggle against the oppressive strength of patriarchal values. Their perceptions of home and belonging are challenged through their non-linear path, revealing the complexity of the diasporic experience for women from distinct backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities.

My main aim in this dissertation is to compare the novels, demonstrating how the three works of fiction are significant literary representations that deal with contemporary theories regarding migration, racism, gender relations, and cosmopolitanism. In the analysis of each novel, various themes are explored, often presented from different perspectives that are influenced by factors such as the historical background, story focus and style of the narrative. Andrea Levy, Buchi Emecheta and Monica Ali share elements of the diaspora experience in their personal lives and belong to a set of contemporary writers who are committed to exposing the struggle of migrant women living between two diverse cultures and oppressed by patriarchal values. As Pallavi Rastogi claims in "Women's Fiction and Literary (Self-) Determination" (2016), these texts create "a new space that is simultaneously female, British Black and British Asian, and that also often memorialises the colonial ancestry many of these writers possess" (RASTOGI, 2016, p. 79). Their texts also challenge the notion of a singular British identity, exposing intertwined factors of gender, race, and class relations that directly impact these women's lives. Each novel presents a rich multicultural map of London with alternative routes to their characters, who certainly speak for real individuals with similar experiences or backgrounds. Most importantly, these works of fiction offer readers the chance to consider new critical perspectives on multiculturalism, globalization, capitalism and feminism. Artistic representations have proven to be a strong means through

which marginalized and oppressed groups find space to articulate their experiences. This is particularly evident in contemporary novels authored by Black British and South Asian women. Levy, Emecheta and Ali showcase their literary achievements by employing different narrative strategies, which not only emphasize their creative prowess but also shed light on the urgent challenges faced by migrant people.

One of my favourite artists, Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, believed that literature represented a journey through language and emotion: "To write is to try to understand, to try and repeat the unrepeatable, to write is to also bless a life which has not been blessed" (AGOSIN, 1999, p. xxxi). This is the line of thought I follow when considering the potential of the corpus chosen for this dissertation. I see fiction as a rich source of various perspectives that can become extremely useful in the processes of cultural and social change. Chris Weedon in her article "Migration, Identity, and Belonging in British Black and South Asian Women's Writing" (2008) provides a more specific view on the power of fictional texts:

> Fiction, like autobiographies, diaries, and letters, has long been a powerful mode for exploring patriarchal relations and for articulating questions of women's subjectivity and identities as they are formed by and in resistance to social relations that are often racist, ethnocentric, and shaped by class and heterosexism (WEEDON, 2008, p. 19).

Such strength is present in the narratives I chose to work with. The sensitive account of the personal journey of each protagonist – involving inevitable reflections on the roles she plays with her husbands, family, homeland traditions, and the choices she makes/has – is played against a compelling backdrop of historical events and cultural details effectively interwoven in the fictional story. In addition, the context of multicultural London is another key element and point of convergence in *Small Island*, *Kehinde* and *Brick Lane*. Multiple faces of London are shown according to the chronological time of the novel. Since each plot focuses on a singular moment in London's history of immigration, as new diasporic communities develop, readers have the opportunity to observe not only how the city inhabitants react but also how those who arrive deal with the locals' reactions. Given that the three novels also deal with the exclusionary aspect of the big city, albeit in different times and degrees, I strongly believe that a careful analysis of historical moments of post-colonial London is relevant to this work. Britain's imperial past and colonizing mindset also weigh heavily on all sides of each story.

Although Black and Asian communities have been increasingly gaining more space within British society and London is seen as the epitome of multiculturalism in Britain,

ongoing debates about cultural diversity, racism, and exclusionary immigration policies reveal the complexity of the issue. Hence, it is worth examining the complex relationship between the political and social trajectory of the city/nation and the impact caused by the presence of marginalized communities, commonly referred to as minorities, particularly after the Second World War. In "British Black and Asian Writing since 1980" (2016), Chris Weedon highlights the significance of cultural memory when looking at the current multi-ethnic reality in Britain:

> Many aspects of the histories that shaped multi-ethnic Britain are largely unknown in wider British society. Historically grounded fiction, poetry and drama offer ways into history that bring it alive and evoke what it might have meant or felt like to those involved (WEEDON, 2016, p. 52).

*Small Island*, *Kehinde* and *Brick Lane* provide a remapping of the multicultural space of London, as they offer literary representations of those who are often placed on the margins despite their active role in the economic and cultural life of the city.

**Roots and routes**

Chapter 1, entitled "Theoretical Scope: Postcolonial and Cosmopolitan London, a Contested Space", explores the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis of the three novels, dwelling on issues pertaining to diasporic processes, such as postcolonialism, cosmopolitanism, feminism, and hybridity, among others. The chapter is divided into sections that provide a sequence of the concepts chosen to be studied along with direct reference to the scholars who write about them. The first part deals with the role of migratory processes in postcolonial literature and how specific feminist approaches shed light on gender issues and the diversity of women's experiences. Texts by theorists, including Elleke Boehmer, Avtar Brah, Deepika Bahri, Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak, among others, are explored so as to demonstrate how the works of fiction in this dissertation are engaged in representing the complexity of the diasporic experience for women, who are also affected by other factors such as race, class, religion and ethnicity. The second part of the chapter focuses on the social and cultural changes that have affected London, mainly after the Second World War, when the whole country was engaged in the process of rebuilding itself. The need for migrant

labour and later different waves of people from former British colonies gradually contributed to changes in the configuration of London. From being the centre of the imperial and colonial British power to the period when the empire was dismantled and former colonies became independent, the city has gone through significant transformations, as the reader of the three selected novels can observe. Finally, the last part of chapter one addresses the pivotal role of gendered diasporas and how the singularity of women's experiences affects their notion of home and their process of identity formation. The works of Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah and Zygmunt Bauman, among others, are key texts for this discussion**.**

The second chapter, "Remapping London and Rewriting Identities in *Small Island*, by Andrea Levy", aims to analyse the novel as a representative text of postcolonial literature, focusing on the experiences of the Windrush generation in Britain. The ship Empire Windrush arrived at Tilbury docks in Essex on 22 June 1948, bringing workers from Jamaica and other Caribbean islands, to help fill post-war UK labour shortages. Those who arrived in the UK between 1948 and 1971 from other Caribbean countries have also been labelled the Windrush generation. *Small Island* (2004a), Levy's fourth novel that features the settling of the Windrush generation in England, gained her several literary awards, such as the Orange Prize for Fiction and The Whitbread Novel Award, both in 2005. Levy, born in London (1956) to Jamaican parents, died in 2017. Her father went to Britain from Jamaica on the Empire Windrush in 1948. Levy's careful observation of the effects of the imperial/colonial mindset on the colonised provides a view of how their migratory experiences involve the encounter with a racist and hostile society, foregrounding the role of memory and colonial discourse in both Jamaica and Britain. *Small Island* also explores various and often differing points of view, through the voices of four protagonists – the Jamaican couple Hortense and Gilbert and the British couple Queenie and Bernard. By creating a narrative built on distinct perspectives, Levy highlights the diverse aspect of British society and its redefinition by the end of the novel.

In Chapter 3, "A House of Her Own: Finding Home in the Diaspora in *Kehinde*, by Buchi Emecheta", the focus is on the process of self-awareness of the protagonist, Kehinde, while she navigates the complex web of patriarchal constraints. Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017), features at number 98 on a list of 100 women recognised in August 2018 by BBC History magazine as having changed the world, for her work as a writer and women's rights activist. Emecheta moved from Nigeria to London in 1962 with her husband and soon began writing stories based on her life. In her novels, she exposes the many forms of marginalization to which black women are subjected both in the diasporic space (England)

and in their homeland (Nigeria). In *Kehinde* (1994), the protagonist who has lived in London for almost twenty years, moves back to Nigeria but then decides to return to England again after experiencing extreme frustration and disappointment in her country of birth. Emecheta's depiction of Kehinde's struggles to abide by her cultural expectations of a good wife and mother reveals the author's concern with the weight of patriarchy and the consequences to the dignity of African women. After facing racial and gender discrimination from both Western and Nigerian cultures, Kehinde redefines her identity as an empowered black woman in Britain. The protagonist's personal journey towards self-awareness and independence is also a story about the role of cultural traditions, the effects of patriarchy, racism, and gender relations.

Chapter 4 "Dwelling in Displacement in *Brick Lane*, by Monica Ali" centres on the analysis of the first novel written by Monica Ali (1967). *Brick Lane* (2004) focuses on the personal journey of Nazneen, who moves from her small village in Bangladesh to London at 16, after an arranged marriage with a much older man, Chanu. Ali was named by Granta magazine, which publishes the works of emerging writers, as one of the twenty best young British novelists in 2003 and *Brick Lane* was shortlisted for the 2003 Booker Prize. Set in the minority community of South-Asians in London's East End, the narrative also has passages set in Bangladesh, which present cultural aspects of Nazneen's homeland, including religious and patriarchal constraints. In London, we see the perspective of South-Asian immigrants that have been living away for years, like Chanu, and also of their children, who were born and raised in Britain and do not relate to Bangladeshi culture, language or lifestyle. Limited by the patriarchal rules of her Muslim background and her husband's authority, Nazneen feels trapped in London and resorts to her childhood memories and her religion in an effort to endure what she believes to be her fate. Her personal journey towards independence and freedom happens alongside the portrayal of British society in the aftermath of September 11 in 2001, when the discrimination against Muslims in the city triggered a new wave of violence and the adoption of exclusionary practices in Britain. The diasporic experience eventually leads Nazneen to take charge of her own choices, in contrast to what she had been taught to believe since childhood.

The three narratives featured in this dissertation belong to the group of novels that Mark Stein describes as novels of transformation, in *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004). Besides providing a rich portrayal of the complex atmosphere of post-imperial Britain,

> these texts are concerned with the creation of a voice, a voice which the protagonists and narrators use to make themselves heard. The voice is a way (a prerequisite even!) of constructing a narrative which can then supplement, revise, confront, and reject other discourses (STEIN, 2004, p. 171).

The concepts, theories and comparisons chosen for this dissertation are meant to show how the works of Levy, Emecheta and Ali are equally part of a transformative genre, which questions preconceived notions of gender, suggests another examination of power relations, celebrates diversity and acknowledges the role of literature as an agent of cultural and social change. Literature is a powerful means of challenging and subverting deep-rooted discourses and practices that have limited and silenced specific groups in the real world. The existence of creative works of fiction that express the plurality of experiences of diasporic women living in Britain has changed the language of representation and opened space to the emergence of more authentic texts. The intertwinement of postcolonial studies and gender theories offers a change of perspective that can be put into practice through a feminist postcolonial approach, which criticizes the consequences of colonialism and reveals the deeply embedded patriarchal and racialized exclusionary practices that are part of globalized and capitalist societies. Therefore, the employment of a feminist postcolonial approach to the selected novels shows how they challenge stereotyped representations of migrant women, reframe the definitions of home in both private and public spheres, and address the connection between the fluidity of identities and the diasporic experience. Finally, I would like to quote Indian writer Suzanna Arundhati Roy (2003) who claims that

> our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness – and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe (ROY, 2003, p. 112).

That is, for me, the greatest power of storytelling: to create possibilities for personal and collective change.

# 1 THEORETICAL SCOPE: POSTCOLONIAL AND COSMOPOLITAN LONDON, A CONTESTED SPACE

> Postcolonial theory is key to understanding the new diasporic community formations in our contemporary age. It allows for the detachment of forms from existing practices and their reformation, or indeed 'transmigration' into new forms into new practices, new diverse logics and the creation of new forms of boundary.
>
> *Yasmin Hussain*

> To define feminism purely in gendered terms assumes that our consciousness of being 'women' has nothing to do with race, class, nation, or sexuality, just with gender. But no one "becomes a woman" (in Simone de Beauvoir's sense) purely because she is female. Ideologies of womanhood have as much to do with class and race as they have to do with sex.
>
> *Chandra Mohanty*

## 1.1 Preliminary considerations

This chapter aims to explore the theoretical framework that underlies this dissertation. All conceptual texts were selected according to their relevance when reading the novels from a comparative perspective. *Small Island* by Andrea Levy (2004a), *Kehinde* by Buchi Emecheta (1994) and *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali (2003) present diasporic women as protagonists (Hortense, Kehinde and Nazneen), who migrate to London for different reasons, all three from former British colonies (Jamaica, Nigeria and Bangladesh, respectively). All novels feature issues related to migration, settlement, sense of place and displacement and the search for belonging. Despite different historical settings and narrative styles used by the authors, the search for identity and belonging is what brings all protagonists into questioning their own cultural heritage as well as the cultural aspects of the society they live in.

Starting from the premise that the three novels can be considered postcolonial fictional narratives, in the first part of this chapter, I demonstrate how postcolonial literature is engaged with (re)writing stories that expose the effects of colonisation on people and places, allowing those who have been on the margin and silenced to reveal their experiences and be read. Postcolonial narratives also focus on the social, political, cultural and emotional outcomes of migratory movements of people from formerly colonised areas to colonial centres. The study of the causes and effects of these dislocations is central to this research. The theme of diaspora and its specific features is equally relevant here since more information on this topic in a contemporary context provides a better understanding of the impact of migratory processes on big cities like London. The effects of the numerous attempts made by the British government to control and restrict these processes are also investigated. In "British Black and Asian Writing since 1980" (2016), Chris Weedon acknowledges the rise and diversification in the work produced in the UK by black and Asian writers, whose texts have provided a different perspective on the experience of new diasporic communities. By looking at how the political and social context of Britain exerted influence in shaping these texts, Weedon examines the relevance of the work of both first and second-generation writers, like Buchi Emecheta, Andrea Levy and Monica Ali, whose texts are framed by the experience of empire, post-colonial legacies, as well as family and community memories of migration (WEEDON, 2016, p. 46).

Although the novels selected to be analysed present men and women characters affected by their diasporic experiences, my focus is on the relevance of theories that consider the specific effects of diaspora on women's lives. Scholar Deepika Bahri reflects upon this issue in "Feminism and Postcolonialism in a Global and Local Frame" (2016). Bahri highlights that the study of gender issues cannot be detached from the project of postcolonial criticism: "Feminist and postcolonial literary perspectives are occupied with similar questions of representation, voice, marginalization, and the relation between politics and literature" (BAHRI, 2016, p. 196). Nonetheless, as Bahri argues, several postcolonial texts fail to address gender issues, "marginalizing them in favour of supposedly more significant goals such as nationbuilding, decolonization, or a critique of white imperialism" (BAHRI, 2016, p. 197). By looking at the parallelism between colonial oppression and male oppression, Bahri, among other theorists like Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, draws attention to the overlapping of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism. Bahri pleads for a 'postcolonial feminism', which requires the acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of women as the subjects of their own history and discourse. From this perspective, the representations of

women in postcolonial contexts should also consider the diversity feature. The selected works of fiction critically reflect on this matter, telling stories that address more than the common themes of postcolonial narratives, further exploring how historical and ideological constructs weigh heavily on contemporary debates around gender issues. The second part of this chapter considers the crucial role of the city of London – within different time frames – in the narratives. As the space of London is a point of convergence in the three novels, the analysis of the city's changes with the intensification of migratory movements, especially after the Second World War, is also relevant to this work. Moreover, I examine the position of London in different periods of history, from being the centre of the imperial and colonial British power, then affected by the dismantling of the empire and the independence of its colonies, to becoming the destination of numerous immigrants from former British colonies. This cosmopolis has both welcomed and rejected its diversity. Several theories provide significant support to the arguments that London is a cosmopolitan city. Thus, not only one definition of cosmopolitanism is presented in this work since various perspectives allow for a more grounded analysis.

The last part of this chapter addresses how gender affects the diasporic processes of Hortense, Kehinde, and Nazneen not as an isolated trait of their identities but operating together with spatial and temporal elements and other identity constituents, such as race, class, and both cultural and historical backgrounds. In *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), scholar Avtar Brah claims that the experiences of women migrants have contributed to changing the language of the diaspora. Despite the difficulties these women encounter after migrating, some have the chance to renegotiate gender relations. In the three novels, the women who move from their homelands to London have to deal with patriarchal structures and are caught in this place of oppression and resistance at a certain point in their trajectory. Alongside the role of gender in the pathways of these characters is the process of des/identification with the new home. The three protagonists are women who eventually have to deal with their subjectivity and change their perceptions of home and belonging, which invariably affects their sense of being in the world.

## 1.2 **In times of diaspora: pains and gains of the postcolonial experience**

According to Bill Ashcroft in "Introduction: Space of Utopia" (2012), postcolonialism can be defined as "that branch of contemporary theory that investigates and develops propositions about the cultural and political impact of European conquest upon colonised societies, and the nature of those societies' responses" (ASHCROFT, 2012, p. 1). In the broadest sense, postcolonialism has encouraged the analysis of colonisation's political, economic, cultural and social effects on both coloniser and colonised countries. Postcolonial as a category in literature has been used to signal its focus on the experience of colonialism, with its past and present effects. Without a doubt, postcolonial literature has sought to review and rewrite the experiences of those who have been silenced and relegated to the margins and deeply affected by colonisation even after its end. In *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (1995), scholar Elleke Boehmer formulates the idea:

> Rather than simply being the writing which 'came after' empire, postcolonial literature is generally defined as that which critically or subversively scrutinises the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives (BOEHMER, 1995, p. 3).

Thus 'post' does not represent a marker of temporality but rather a continuous strategy to scrutinise the impact of colonisation on nations and their people. In *Histories, Empires and the Post-Colonial Moment* (1996), Catherine Hall calls attention to the "embarrassing reminders of the Empire" (HALL, 1996, p. 67), which should not be forgotten but remembered differently through the writing of stories from another perspective, rooted in resistance and celebrating difference against oppression and discrimination. To put it in another way, postcolonialism allows for the writing of narratives from the perspective of the oppressed, of the subjugated people, or the 'subaltern classes', as feminist critic Gayatri Spivak points out in her text "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Alongside Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, Spivak has been widely acknowledged for her contribution to the field. Although many other intellectuals have developed valuable theories about postcolonialism, this dissertation refers to the works of Homi Bhabha, Elleke Boehmer, Avtar Brah, Gayatri Spivak, Anibal Quijano e Walter Mignolo due to their relevance to the arguments developed here.

Peruvian scholar Anibal Quijano is credited with coining the term "coloniality of power", which refers to the way in which colonialism has established and maintained a system of power relations that continues to impact the world today. The sociologist posits that colonialism not only led to the subjugation of colonised peoples and the exploitation of their

resources, but also the creation of a global hierarchy based on race and ethnicity. Building upon Quijano's ideas, Walter Mignolo makes a complex analysis of the pair coloniality/modernity in his book *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (2011). Mignolo argues that the modernization process driven by European colonialism and imperialism was developed and imposed as the only legitimate reference to other societies, which led to the marginalization of non-European cultures. Both Quijano and Mignolo advocate for the importance to decolonize knowledge, that is, to challenge the Eurocentric and colonial biases in existing academic disciplines and to promote alternative perspectives that originate from subaltern communities. The work of both scholars is discussed again in the chapter about *Small Island*.

With a focus on the connections between independence, nationalism and gender, Elleke Boehmer draws attention to the different spaces given to male-authored postcolonial narratives and those produced by women. Boehmer also argues that during the period of nationalist movements of colonised countries, there was a preference for texts based on a male-centred perspective or vision that heightened nationalistic ideals and often defended patriarchal authority. Boehmer explains that women "were disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but also of race, social class and, in some cases, religion, caste, sexuality, and regional status" (BOEHMER, 1995, p. 216). As a result, native and subaltern women were doubly or triply marginalised and had their writing disregarded. However, in the early 70s, women in the Third World and minority women in the First World started to take a more assertive position concerning Western feminism, also inspired by the women's movements taking place in Europe and the US. According to Boehmer, the key component of the literature produced by these ex-colonised women was that their writing focused on the diversity of women's experiences, which were affected by other factors such as race, class, religion and ethnicity. Further in her text, Boehmer explains how the geographical and cultural displacements experienced by many women writers in the late 80s and into the twenty-first century influenced their narratives and transformed postcolonial literature.

This issue is also addressed by feminist critic Chandra Mohanty in *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003). Mohanty observes how the generalized notion of the 'Third World Women' that is shared and represented not only when in their countries of origin but also when they are in British territory fails to consider other aspects and roles also related to their experiences. According to Mohanty, the average description is of a woman who

> leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being "Third World" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions (MOHANTY, 2003a, p. 31).

This simplification resembles a colonial and hegemonic view of the Third World, which perceives these women as a group of helpless, passive victims, unable to resist the assigned role of victims and oppressed. Nevertheless, Mohanty conceives the idea that these representations can be challenged through the writing of works of fiction such as the ones chosen as the corpus of this dissertation. In addition, by centring on the experiences of women migrants, the three authors featured here can be seen as writers of diasporas, writing novels that have offered an alternative way of looking at cultural, social and historical elements that are embedded in their dislocations. The literary fields designated as Black British Literature and British South Asian Literature, for example, have become emblematic in presenting a new route for British literature as part of contemporary postcolonial writing. Both genres offer counter-narratives for individual and collective experiences that have had limited or negative representations in mainstream cultural forms. In the introductory chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature* (2016), Deirdre Osborne (2016, p. 2) explains that the two fields reveal "the magnitude of post-war migration's rejuvenation and renovation of British culture. Post-war immigrants had a major impact on British society – and British society had a major impact on them". Such impact is revealed in the narratives in this dissertation.

The protagonists of *Small Island*, *Kehinde* and *Brick Lane* are women from countries linked to Britain through a history of colonization – Jamaica, Nigeria and Bangladesh (former East Pakistan). The authors Andrea Levy, Buchi Emecheta and Monica Ali share elements of the diaspora experience in their personal lives and belong to a set of contemporary writers who explore different voices of the diasporic subject in their novels. According to Chris Weedon, the work produced by British black and Asian writers between 1980 and 2010 is worthy of attention because it has "countered invisibility, addressed stereotypes, challenged undifferentiated understandings of Britain's ethnic and religious 'Others', engaged with pressing social issues and produced a more inclusive cultural memory about empire and post-war Britain" (WEEDON, 2016, p. 53). The works of fiction to be examined here are all engaged in revealing the complexity of the processes of cultural and social changes that Britain has undergone since the end of the Second World War. By revealing how the

protagonists' dislocations affect their sense of being in the world, these narratives transgress the boundaries of geographical belonging, placing movement, instability, and the process of 'becoming' at their core.

The search for belonging experienced by Hortense, Kehinde and Nazneen is characterised by a constant movement between preserving long-term beliefs and rejecting or partially assimilating the hostland cultural practices. Likewise, the spaces occupied by them are marked by hybridity, which following Homi Bhabha's theory, challenges the assumption that cultures are static and that identities are homogeneous. Bhabha claims that all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. Hence hybridity is a mode of relation to cultural differences and 'otherness', which results from an individual's contact with other cultures and languages. Bhabha focuses on the opening of a 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. In this space, ideas of sameness and difference are integrated, revealing their components and interdependence. In the three novels, the process of identity formation of the protagonists is marked by learning to acknowledge and/or cross the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. The concept of diaspora and its influence on the identity formation of dislocated subjects is central to this work. The three novels to be discussed expose various social, political, cultural and emotional outcomes of migratory movements of people from formerly colonised areas to colonial centres. Several scholars have expanded the concept of diaspora, highlighting its specific features and limitations according to their line of argument and field of work. In this dissertation, articles written by Stuart Hall, James Clifford, Avtar Brah and Susan Friedman are used as a suggested standpoint due to their significance when analysing issues chosen to be explored later in connection with the novels. From the Greek term *diasperien*, from dia-, "across" and -sperien, "to sow or scatter seeds", (BRAZIEL; MANNUR, 2003, p. 5), the term diaspora was historically used to refer to the dispersion of Jewish people who were forced into political exile. The term is also used to describe the dislocation of other groups that were forced out of their lands due to European practices of colonialism, such as the slave trade. Although diasporic movements already happened long before the era of British imperialism, for example, the proposed theories have drawn attention to the configuration and effects of migratory processes that happened in the second half of the twentieth century.

James Clifford quoting William Safran in "Diasporas" (1994) suggests that the six main elements of diasporas are "a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship" (CLIFFORD,

1994, p. 247). Although not all of these elements are part of the numerous migratory movements happening worldwide, some consistencies can be found in different contexts as Susan Friedman writes in "Cosmopolitanism, Religion, Diaspora: Kwame Anthony Appiah and Contemporary Muslim Women's Writing" (2018). Since diasporic communities are affected significantly by hostland behaviour, they "experience different kinds and degrees of institutional, economic, political, cultural, and linguistic integration" (FRIEDMAN, 2018, p. 206). Diasporic movements involve not only the physical relocation of individuals but, more significantly, the questioning of their cultural and social values.

Avtar Brah draws attention to the diversity of diasporic journeys depending on gender, race, class, religion, language and generation components. In each of the novels chosen to be the focus of my dissertation, different diasporic experiences are presented, not only those of the protagonists but also of their male counterparts. Brah also suggests that "diasporas are also potentially sites of hopes and new beginnings. They are contested, and cultural and political terrains, where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure" (BRAH, 1996, p. 193). In other words, even though losses are part of the diaspora experience, they are not the only aspect to be considered. Despite the feeling of estrangement experienced by Hortense, Kehinde and Nazneen when moving (or returning) to London, there is also the awareness that returning to their countries of origin is not the solution to their feeling of displacement. This perception drives them to find a place where they can feel they belong. Another significant point made by Brah is how different discourses and practices of racialisation and categorisation based on religion, for example, disregard the singularity of the experiences of diasporic subjects. Labelling these groups based on a pre-given idea of a collective identity, which considers race or religion as homogenising factors, fails to account for "the materiality of everyday life" or "the everyday stories" that constitute each individual's subjectivity. In other words, all subjects are fragmented and dynamic, and their identities encompass the complexities and contradictions of their experiences and relationships. Brah's concepts of 'diaspora space' and 'homing desire' are articulated in later chapters alongside the analysis of the novels.

## 1.3 **Britain before and after the Second World War: same roots, new branches**

Britain's history of migration has been undoubtedly connected to its past imperial and colonial power over regions of the world across the centuries and also its relationship with Europe. From the 16th to the 20th century, the British Empire controlled a vast amount of territory and resources around the world, including India, Africa, and parts of Asia and the Americas. The empire was maintained through military force and economic domination and had a significant impact on the cultures, economies, and politics of the colonised regions. In the early 1920s, Britain had colonies on all the continents – Europe, America, including the Caribbean region, Asia and Africa, and all the colonies had English as their official language. The British government, businesses, and citizens all played a role in the development and maintenance of the empire, and London was the centre of Britain's political and economic power. Due to its crucial commercial and administrative role, the city was also a site of trade and large movements of people. Port cities, such as Liverpool and Bristol, were also important places for the growth of England's economy and the establishment of migration processes. In *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK* (2020), William Shankley and Bridget Byrne point out that:

> The exploitation of world resources and the expansion of the British empire brought slaves, servants, sailors and workers as well as traders to Britain, alongside entrepreneurs and political and religious refugees who all helped to shape the culture and the economy (SHANKLEY; BYRNE, 2020, p. 36).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, according to Tahseen Alam Choudhury in "Revisiting Diaspora: History, Migration, and Multiculturalism of South Asians in Britain" (2018), a considerable number of middle-class and upper-middle-class Indians moved to Britain to advance academically and professionally: "The capital of Britain attracted the middle-class gentry and the descendants of aristocratic families in India, who hoped to come and experience the brilliance of British education and culture" (CHOUDHURY, 2018, p. 124).

The early stages of the First World War were definitely a moment when thousands of men, women, and children sought refuge in Britain. One example is the case of Serbians who fled their country after its military defeat. Around 300 children found assistance from the Serbian Relief Fund, which aimed to help them despite the negative attitude of the British government. In the end, they were allocated to cities across England, Scotland and Wales where they received education alongside British children. In 1937, the British government had also been against the entry of child refugees from the Spanish Civil War, but activists

succeeded in bringing them to Britain. From 1938 to 1939, around 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish children were evacuated from Germany to Britain, where they were supported by the British Jewish community. However, after the Nazis' annexation of Austria, a new visa requirement was established by the British government in order to prevent an influx of other refugees. After the outbreak of World War II, all visas were cancelled and any migration from Nazi-occupied territory was banned. Existing Jewish migrants settled in Britain were now classified as 'enemy alien immigrants' (OUR..., 2014).

The period following World War II marked an increase in the arrival of people from both Europe and the British colonies. Britain's infrastructure and economy needed to be restored after the destructive consequences of the war, so the UK government actively supported cheap-labour migration. Groups of non-white migrants came predominantly from the Caribbean Islands, such as Jamaica. They were attracted to fill labour shortages in the UK, whether in the transport sector, industries or factories, settling in London and other English cities. The migration of the Caribbeans was feasible because of their British subject status, which granted them citizenship and the right to move to the UK. In 1948, a ship called *Empire Windrush* carried about 500 people from British colonies such as Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and other islands to the Tilbury Docks, London. They were mainly young men and ex-servicemen, who had fought alongside British soldiers during the war, willing to seize employment opportunities in the motherland, helping fill post-war UK labour shortages. The arrival of the ship is still considered a symbol of the beginning of a new phase of multicultural Britain, even though ethnic minority migrants mainly faced hostility and racism when settling in the country. In terms of legislation, the passage of the British Nationality Act 1948 marked the open-door policy adopted by the British government. With the creation of the status of "Citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies" (CUKC), the act declared that any person having that status was known either as a British subject or as a Commonwealth[1] citizen and had the same rights to enter, work and settle with their families in the UK. The end of the war also marked the strengthening of movements in the colonies which wanted independence from British rule, like India.

India was under British rule for almost 200 years, from the late 18$^{th}$ century to the mid-20$^{th}$ century. The East India Company, a British trading company, gained control of parts of India in the late 1700s and by 1858, the British government had taken direct control of the

[1] In 1948, the British Commonwealth consisted of sovereign states that owed allegiance to the British monarch. These included dependent and independent territories.

entire subcontinent. British colonial rule was characterized by economic exploitation, political oppression, and the suppression of Indian culture and traditions. The Indian independence movement began in the late 19th century and gained force during the early 20th century, led by key figures such as Mahatma Gandhi. At first, the plan for India's independence was accepted by both the Indian National Congress (Hindus) and the Muslim League. However, separatist tendencies gained strength in the counsels of the Muslim League, which called for the partition of the country. The League declined the idea of a united India and demanded autonomy through the creation of a nation called Pakistan. This event caused so much bloodshed and destruction of property that the Congress eventually agreed to the partition of the country, which meant the creation of two new states, Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Britain's interest in maintaining control over India gradually evaporated, so king George VI sent his cousin Lord Louis Mountbatten to manage Britain's retreat. The new nations' borders were hastily demarcated by Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer who had never set foot in India. Radcliffe and his team were told to draw boundaries that respected religious majorities and prioritized contiguous borders. The "Radcliffe Line" was easy to draw in areas with a distinct majority, but Radcliffe soon found that the religious groups were dispersed throughout India. In areas like Bengal and Punjab, which had near-equal Hindu and Muslim populations, drawing a line proved particularly difficult. Radcliffe and his team—none of whom had expertise in mapmaking or Indian politics and culture—split both provinces in two and awarded roughly half to each new nation. This meant the new country of Pakistan would not be a contiguous nation: Most of its land mass lay in the north-western corner of India, with a chunk called East Pakistan that lay in Bengal in the west (BLAKEMORE, 2022). The establishment of these two dominions meant both areas faced problems of law and order and the aftermath of communal anarchy which resulted in the exodus or evacuation of minorities from disturbed areas (PARTITION..., 1948). The resulting creation of a non-contiguous Pakistan forced millions of Hindus and Muslims to relocate. The country was torn apart, but Britain was reluctant to use its military force to keep law and order. A series of violent riots, thousands of deaths and a big wave of migration followed both across India and Britain as a way to escape the ongoing conflict.

In literary studies, the extreme violence and suffering caused by this event have been the major theme of what is called Partition literature. This contemporary genre has been committed to depicting and revisiting the effects of the Partition of India on the lives of those who were forced to leave their homes and were traumatized by the war and the loss of beloved ones. Both fictional and non-fiction texts have aimed to explore the event,

particularly from marginalized perspectives. Although Partition literature was by and large dominated by male authors for a long time, from the 1990s on, women writers have explored the theme, providing a sharp focus on the specificities of women who lived through the event. Because of the growth in translations, those texts were discovered by the English-reading audience, which helped increase their visibility and bring untold versions to the fore (BHASKAR, 2022). During the 1950s and 1960s, large numbers of migrants from India and Pakistan found work in the manufacturing and service sectors in London and Manchester and Leeds. Another wave of South Asian migrants took place in the late 1960s and the early 1970s when many fled East Africa and moved to Britain, impelled by colonial relations. People from East Pakistan also moved from their homeland due to natural disasters, like floods, and civil conflicts. Just before the independence of Bangladesh (former East Pakistan) in 1971, there were around 22,000 Bengalis in Britain.

However, the immigration boom from non-European citizens soon ceased to be welcomed as more black and Asian populations settled in, bringing their families and planning to remain in the country. In the late 1950s, racial tensions heightened, and riots took place in Notting Hill and Nottingham, signalling a shift in the social and political management of the immigration matter.

Although immigration into Britain was not a new phenomenon, the arrival of ‘coloured’ people from the colonies in big numbers had a different dimension than the presence of the Irish or other European immigrants. Skin colour was a key determinant of how these individuals were received, and soon they became victims of discrimination and racial prejudice. As governments enforced more restrictive entry requirements, Britain’s immigration practices became less welcoming and more discriminatory and racist. Immigration control was explicitly related to controlling relations among racial groups within Britain. One example was the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, which restricted access to Britain to those who held Commonwealth passports according to their work prospects in the country. Following the pressure of several political organisations, mainly from the Conservative government, further immigration acts were passed in 1968 and 1971, introducing tighter requirements that shifted the status of British citizenship. The first required those seeking British citizenship to prove they had a parent or grandparent who was a British citizen. The latter allowed immigrants from the Commonwealth to reside in Britain only temporarily through a system of work permits. Shankley and Byrne write: “Successive citizenship and immigration acts further closed the rights and pathways to move to the UK from former colonies” (SHANKLEY; BYRNE, 2020, p. 38). In the art field, this time proved

to be extremely pivotal. New cultural organizations were generated aiming to validate and articulate the voices of those seen as Black British citizens:

> Many began to use race as a crucial, if ultimately limiting, platform for artistic self-representation, and in this context, 'black' began to function as an 'identificatory political signifier', a cultural category deliberately constructed at a particular moment in time (NASTA, 2016, p. 34).

By that time, the British government was strongly committed to stopping the arrival of non-white immigrants from former colonies. However, Britain had become a destination for those seeking refuge from war-torn countries. For example, in 1972, almost 30,000 people were expelled from war-torn Uganda, a former British colony. The British government declared the country had a moral and legal responsibility to accept those with UK passports.

The early 80s coincided with Margaret Thatcher's first term as British prime minister. Her conservative tenure was marked by a series of controversial measures that heavily affected the economic and social situation in Britain, leading to rising unemployment rates and social protests. In 1981, major riots happened in London and other cities in England, revealing the tensions triggered by institutional racism, in a government that clearly promoted ethnic and gender divisions.

In 1990, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, asylum applications rose suddenly to more than 16,000 people. After two years, these numbers doubled and then doubled again (LOWE, 2020). In 1992, the UK joined the EU, and European citizens were all welcome to settle in the country. Other nations joined the EU from 2004 onwards, and Britain received citizens from countries like Poland, Hungary and Romania. Nonetheless, the most recent immigration policies implemented in the UK aimed to control net immigration, affecting migrants and ethnic minorities.

As it is discussed in the next chapter, along with my analysis of *Small Island*, the 'Hostile Environment Policy' introduced by former home secretary Theresa May in 2012 had the objective of containing illegal immigration in Britain. The plan was another example of the inherent racism of British postwar immigration policy, which eventually led to the *Windrush* scandal. The scandal has affected migrants from Commonwealth countries and others. Despite their arrival in Britain with full rights, some had to prove their status and show documentation that had never been requested previously. The Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 have imposed more severe restrictions, implementing policies that allowed the government to remove people from the region and forced schools, landlords and even

hospitals to act as border guards. A series of strict measures and laws have only made it more difficult for those unable to prove a legal stay. With the regulations in effect, thousands of people who have long called Britain home faced dire consequences, forced to prove their right to remain in the country after decades of living and working there.

In "The Architecture of Race in the British Immigration and Citizenship Regime: The Figure of the Undesirable Other" (2021), researcher Iva Dodevska discusses how current British policies of immigration control and citizenship regime reflect the production and maintenance of racial difference as a way of restricting the movement and settling of non-white and non-European subjects in England. Through examining official documents, laws and political debates, Dodevska shows how Britain's history is a rich source of information that explains the motives behind the successive changes in immigration policies made by the British government. Crucially, Dodevska demonstrates how the logic of racial difference has permeated Britain's restrictive immigration and asylum policies, profoundly embedded in the nation's colonial-imperial mindset and white supremacist project. As the viability of the asylum system has been threatened, it is clear how the anti-black policies of the past decades have contributed to labelling those refugees coming from Britain's former colonies as undesirable groups. Citizenship is also becoming a matter of national security with the narrative of the "war on terror". Yet, the racialised protagonist ceased to be only the Afro-Caribbean. Now Muslims have also been considered a source of danger to British society. Islamophobia, which can be defined as intolerance and fear of Muslims, appears to have been institutionalised by the British government. Although religious discrimination is not an issue limited to British society, the novels to be analysed in this dissertation reproduce some of the social and political processes that have taken place in Britain since the end of the Second World War. Religious intolerance has become as significant a cause of prejudice as race, particularly in the case of Muslim communities, as is shown by Monica Ali in *Brick Lane*. Despite the changes in the faces of the 'undesirable others' over the years (West-Indian, East-Asian, Muslim, Eastern European), all these images are part of the constructed idea of racial difference. This shifting has happened according to the political and social concerns of the time, but its root lies in a desire to rebuild Britain's imperial past.

### 1.4 **National identity crisis: who is British and who is not?**

Imperial and colonial dimensions of the British nation were a crucial and constitutive part of building a rigid notion of British culture and identity. In "Gender Politics and Imperial Politics: Rethinking the Histories of Empire" (1995), Catherine Hall writes: "For centuries white British identities, both male and female, have been constructed through sets of assumptions about imperial power in relation to racialised others" (HALL, 1995, p.48). Nevertheless, Britain no longer has an empire, and a rethinking of these assumptions along with the acceptance of a multicultural nation needs to be taken into consideration. I find it pertinent to look into the concept of Britishness or Englishness to explain how previous elements associated with this concept have changed.

According to scholar Anna Katharina Böhme in "Challenging Englishness: Rebranding and Rewriting National Identity in Contemporary English Fiction" (2012), the differences between the use of the terms Englishness and Britishness can be understood depending on the context in which they are referred to, and also to the attributes they tend to be associated with. Böhme explains: "It is apparent that Britishness is more often a reference in political and legal discourses requiring political correctness, while the term Englishness is predominantly used in the cultural sphere" (BÖHME, 2012, p. 11). As the term British is used in the three novels when there is a reference to the nation and its culture and society, I use Britishness or British national identity in my analysis. My choice is also grounded in many references to political discourses and a specific set of interests expressed by the British government.

As previously mentioned, the gradual disintegration of Britain's imperial power was driven by a combination of factors such as economic changes, political developments, and growing pressure from nationalist movements within the colonies, mainly after World War II. Although Great Britain emerged as one of the victors of the war, it had been economically devastated by the conflict. Another major contributing factor to the decline of the British Empire was the Suez Crisis of 1956. The decision to invade Egypt and retake the Suez Canal was heavily criticized by the international community. The crisis damaged Britain's reputation as a world power and exposed the country's economic vulnerabilities. Thus, British imperialism in the Middle East came to an end as the country had to withdraw its troops from the region along with France. As various territories and colonies gained independence, the Empire lost its force, causing a disruption in the way Britain was seen both domestically and internationally. Following the dismantling of the Empire, the concept of British national identity suffered a severe crisis. As the traditional class system lost its strictness, old social hierarchical standards were reformulated. Further, immigration from the former colonies

redefined the concept of Englishness dominated by images of white Englishmen. These events challenged the ideas typically associated with English culture, which inevitably led to a gradual feeling of loss of national identity. As Krishan Kumar observes in *The Making of English National Identity* (2003), old assumptions of a single national identity have disappeared:

> They have gone because the empire has gone, and so has British economic power. They have gone because the English are not even safe in their homelands, challenged as they are by the rise of Celtic nationalism and by the claims of 'multiculturalism' within English society (KUMAR, 2003, p. 16).

World War II brought about significant changes in the organisation of British society, with the effacement of differences in class and gender. This transformation impacted the cultural and social aspects of the country. As Deirdre Osborne states,

> populations from African, Caribbean and South Asian locations arriving in Britain post-war brought diasporic sensibilities and literary heritages that have profoundly transformed British national culture, leading to a more complex and inclusive sense of its past (OSBORNE, 2016, p. 1).

Due to the collective effort to support the country's economy during the war, traditional divisions of gender roles were dismantled as women had to fill job positions left by men who were fighting. The arrival of immigrants changed the country's racial structure, and this new social configuration affected the immigrants and the native inhabitants in different ways. The newcomers were shocked to find out that they were excluded from the British identity context. At the same time, the natives were extremely disturbed to see individuals from the colonies walking around their national territory. Andrea Levy shows this crucial moment in the history of England in *Small Island.* The Jamaican immigrants Hortense and Gilbert are seen as strangers and outsiders by most white English residents in London, who are annoyed by their presence. Through the character of Bernard Bligh, we see the subjective effects of the empire and its consequent identity crisis. When he returns to England after serving in the war, Bernard thinks his Britain has lost its (white) purity and feels threatened by the presence of black immigrants in his neighbourhood.

In *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (2004), Paul Gilroy examines how the dissolution of the British Empire has resulted in a hostile attitude towards blacks and immigrants. The scholar uses the term 'postcolonial melancholia' to describe the way British society has rejected multiculturalism, which involves mourning a homogeneous British

culture that is being threatened by the presence of the 'other', the 'stranger', and 'the non-British' citizen. Gilroy claims there are two divergent versions of British national culture in the aftermath of the Empire: the 'convivial' mode and the 'melancholy' mode. In the convivial mode, British identity is grounded in everyday encounters with diversity (different nationalities, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds), which ultimately are part of a cosmopolitan environment. In this version, members of the society accept "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas" (GILROY, 2004, p. xv). Thus, there is empathy and sympathy despite cultural differences. People interact with each other and inhabit a shared space. The 'melancholy mode', on the other hand, reveals a failure to come to terms with the loss of the empire. Then, the refusal to acknowledge that the imperial past was harmful ends up in a feeling of nostalgia. This mode fears "the prospect of exposure to either strangers or otherness" (GILROY, 2004, p. 99). Such a mentality has led the British government to set ethnically-based criteria for arrests as well as tougher measures of border controls, which have aimed to curb the presence of immigrants in the country. More than geographical limitations, borders gain a broader meaning when it comes to the discussion of migratory movements. In the diasporic context, borders "act as metaphors for psychological, spiritual, class and racialized boundaries which signify the locality of subjectivities" (HUSSAIN, 2005, p. 8). Each of these metaphors has a singular narrative that ends up excluding those who do not share similar beliefs, values or cultural codes.

## 1.5 **London: a city of migrants, a contested space**

In *Postcolonial London – Rewriting the metropolis* (2004), scholar John McLeod explains that the end of the Second World War is a watershed in the transformation of the city of London. He writes that "the urban and human geography of London has been irreversibly altered as a consequence of patterns of migration from countries with a history of colonialism" (MCLEOD, 2004, p. 4). Undoubtedly, immigrant communities have transformed and reshaped the city's physical, social and cultural landscape by making specific areas of London places to preserve their culture, where traditions and customs are easily perceived. In his book, McLeod demonstrates how imperial London can be rewritten as a postcolonial metropolis in the light of fictional works, which not only represent the life of

the city and its inhabitants but also engage in a critical reading of contemporary London. McLeod's work focuses on the imaginative transformation of the city seen in the works of both well-known and new writers, who describe the diverse experiences of diasporic Londoners against a backdrop of historical, political and social circumstances. The city's divisive architecture of power plays a significant part in promoting social inequality and discrimination against diasporic communities, which often remain connected to their homeland's cultural practices as a form of resistance and negotiation.

An analysis of contemporary fictional works that have London as a setting will certainly profit from a general discussion of key elements figuring in multi-ethnic and diverse societies that purportedly welcome people with different backgrounds and cultures. The formative process of Britain as a multicultural nation is unquestionably related to the migratory flows to the country, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. The arrival, along with the rise and the changing character of migrants over the last decades, has brought about the emergence of new communities spread widely in urban areas across the country, interacting with the host country and giving birth to new forms of identity.

In "What is Postwar Multiculturalism in Theory and Practice?" (2019), Richard Ashcroft and Mark Bevir address the issue of multiculturalism and its implications, highlighting that the term can be applied differently depending on the context. In an attempt to 'define' multiculturalism without leading to misconceptions while accepting its complexity, Ashcroft and Bevir set out to identify common situations that can happen in a multicultural setting. They emphasize that "multiculturalism in Britain is closely associated with debates over immigration, race, citizenship, and national identity" (ASHCROFT; BEVIR, 2019, p. 12). Therefore, together with the strategies to deal with demographic diversity, the notion of a British national identity has been challenged and redefined. In the past decades, the British government's harsh legislative measures against the presence of non-European immigrants in the country have aggravated intolerance and racial discrimination in relation to ethnic minorities and cultural diversities. This behaviour goes against older modes of multiculturalism, which endorse mutual acceptance of differences and respect for collective identities.

Anthropologist Steven Vertovec points out that the original model has been questioned even by its previous supporters due to its contribution to "a demise of the welfare state and the failure of public services" (VERTOVEC, 2010, p. 84). British multiculturalism has also been impacted by events such as 9/11 and the London bombings of 2005, as the government responded with tighter measures to control immigration flows, especially coming from

Muslim countries. Conservative politicians such as David Cameron and Theresa May reinforced the need to recover British values, which they said had been weakened by the multiculturalist approach.

In 2005, a special section in *The Guardian* newspaper celebrated the diverse character of London, claiming that every race, colour, nation and religion on earth was part of the great experiment of multiculturalism provided by the city. After travelling across the capital to visit immigrant communities and interview some of their members, Leo Benedictus calls attention to two aspects of migrant community life. One is that new communities often focus on bringing their homemade food experience to the city as it is the first thing they miss from back home. Thus, Londoners' enthusiasm for foreign food creates thousands of jobs for immigrants and makes the establishment of new communities that much easier (BENEDICTUS, 2005). Yet he also observes that Londoners are pretty indifferent to immigrants: "Londoners don't tolerate our city's diversity so much as ignore it. And where there is ignorance, intolerance can quickly be fomented. In fact, this happens all the time". In this context, individuals belonging to diasporic communities are frequently seen as outsiders, representing the other, the different often viewed as a threat or a burden to society. Debates over a failed multiculturalism and the need to assert a British national identity undoubtedly strengthened UK's decision to withdraw from European Union. After more than two years of negotiations and extended deadlines following the submission of Britain's formal request to leave the EU in 2017, Brexit (a portmanteau word for British Exit) formally happened in January 2020. Britain's departure from the EU meant the freedom to work and move freely between the UK and the EU was no longer possible. One of the key factors behind the Brexit vote was concerns over immigration and border control. Since leaving the EU, the UK has implemented a new immigration system, which has brought both challenges and opportunities for integration processes between migrants and the rest of the population (SUMPTION; KIERANS, 2021). The new system introduces a points-based system, which aims to attract high-skilled workers, by offering work visas based on a set of criteria. According to an article written by Georgina Sturge, a statistician at the House of Commons Library, there isn't enough data available yet to verify how the new system has affected the number of people migrating to the UK, especially because of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the number of visas – study, work, residence and humanitarian categories – issued in the year ending June 2022 is reported, showing a rise in non-EU migrant workers who most likely found jobs that would previously have gone to EU citizens. The article also reports that because the former method of estimating immigration was discontinued in 2020,

there is a gap in the data as the new method is not fully operational (STURGE, 2022). By changing the nature of the formal relationship between the UK and the EU, Brexit has damaged Britain's economic growth and weakened forces in the EU that favor integration, with anti-immigration parties in Germany and France gaining more strength. Overall, Brexit voters conveyed an obvious message: immigrant multiculturalism had to be controlled, and the notion of a pure British identity needed to be fostered.

## 1.6 **Cosmopolitanism in London**

Despite the unresolved issues concerning ethnic minorities, cultural diversity and national identity, the description of London as a cosmopolitan city is unquestionable as long as one keeps in mind that the term has suffered changes over time. Renato Cordeiro Gomes explains that the historical use of the term cosmopolitanism is related to a decisive moment of the Enlightenment period when cosmopolitan ethics meant that all citizens should be treated as citizens of the cosmos, that is, belonging to the universe (GOMES, 2004, p. 15).

In *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (1998), Bruce Robbins refers to cosmopolitanism in relation to transnational experiences that happen to be more particular than universal and are often underprivileged. He remarks that cosmopolitanism should no longer be conceived as singular, but as plural. From this perspective, analyses of cosmopolitanism must consider the weight of history, politics and power relations. The scholar justifies the elaboration of the term *cosmopolitics* as "an effort to describe, from within multiculturalism, a name for the genuine striving toward common norms and mutual translatability" (CHEAH; ROBBINS, 1998, p. 13).

In the fields of Sociology and Political Sciences, cosmopolitanism has become a keyword due to its relevance in the analysis of our current moment in history. Its contemporary meanings have often linked cosmopolitanism with the effects of globalisation on societies and their members. The fluidity of borders, the diversity of populations in big cities, the high frequency of inflows of goods and services, and the expansion of capitalism in the modern world have all been considered signs of globalisation. At the same time, social inequality and oppression have also been part of many globalised processes, which have often prioritised economic expansion over the basic notions of human conviviality with differences.

When one thinks of a cosmopolitan environment, elements such as diversity, hospitality, tolerance and respect might come to mind. Ideally, there is a collective effort made by the government and society to fight against high levels of inequality and promote all citizens' well-being. Professor Gustavo Lins Ribeiro explains that:

> Cosmopolitanism presupposes a positive attitude towards difference, a desire to construct broad allegiances and equal and peaceful global communities of citizens who should be able to communicate across cultural and social boundaries forming a universalist solidarity (RIBEIRO, 2001, p. 19).

This quotation refers to a cosmopolitan project engaged with difference, driving individuals to position themselves in relation to others, escaping from a singular discourse of one community. The increasing migratory movements, especially after the Second World War, have affected the geographical, social and economic landscape of big cities and how their citizens coexist. Being a key place for migrants to start their integration into the new society, cosmopolitan cities are generally regarded as open doors to their entry and settlement. But how do cosmopolitan cities deal with the pluralistic character of their citizens, the so-called cosmopolitan citizens? First, it is relevant to consider that the term cosmopolitan citizenship has been used differently according to historical, political and social contexts. In the 18$^{th}$ century, German philosopher Immanuel Kant's vision of cosmopolitan citizenship was based on the principles of universal hospitality, human dignity, and the moral equality of all people. Kant believed that the basis of a cosmopolitan political community should consist of shared human values regardless of individuals' national or cultural background. However, since the beginning of the contemporary state, there has been more flexibility and accommodation in its definition because the meaning of citizenship itself has also been historically and socially variable. Now cosmopolitan citizenship is seen as a response to the increasing interconnectedness and interdependence of people, nations and economies.

Needless to say, a set of social inequalities and racial and religious conflicts can be observed in cosmopolitan cities. In 2000, the journal of cultural studies Public Culture published an article called *Cosmopolitanisms,* in which the four authors put forward that:

> Cosmopolitans today are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism's upward mobility, and bereft of those comforts and customs of national belonging. Refugees, peoples of the diaspora, and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitical community (POLLOCK *et al.*, 2000, p. 582).

Although the emblematic ethnic diversity in London has been often seen as a matter of pride, the city has failed to embrace its diversity, neglecting the participation of the

'victims of modernity' in the broader political and social context of the city, excluding them from rights of citizenship, and aiming at homogenising their differences through their seclusion to specific areas of the city. In *The Global City* (2005), Saskia Sassen observes that cosmopolitan cities, like London, are sites where most immigrants have become marginalised, where hospitality has given place to hostility:

> If we consider that global cities concentrate both the leading sectors of global capital and a growing share of disadvantaged populations (immigrants, many of the disadvantaged women, people of colour generally, and, in the megacities of developing countries, masses of shanty dwellers) then we can see that cities have become a strategic terrain for a whole series of conflicts and contradictions (SASSEN, 2005, p. 39).

Undeniably, the participation of immigrants in the city's economy is decisive in shaping the global processes inherent to capitalism, although they are still considered disempowered actors, as Sassen points out. Other scholars, including Silviano Santiago, Walter Mignolo, Susan Friedman, and Anthony Appiah, among others, have addressed the plight of these disempowered actors and proposed alternative ways to articulate the notion of cosmopolitanism in the face of our contemporary moment, marked by globalisation, multiculturalism, and transnational migrations. In "The Cosmopolitanism of the Poor" (2004), Santiago points out a new form of cosmopolitanism, which is associated with disadvantaged groups, such as poor immigrants and certain ethnic minorities. Santiago argues that it is necessary to consider the diversity and the discourse of those on the margin, away from the hegemonic centres. Thus, a project that sees beyond the Eurocentric notion of cosmopolitism needs to be conceived. Santiago explains:

> A new and thus far unknown form of social inequality has been created, which cannot be understood in the legal landscape of a single nation-state, nor through the official ties between national governments, since the economic reason that brings the new poor to the postmodern metropolis is transnational and, in the majority of cases, is also clandestine. The precarious position of its new inhabitants is determined in large part by the need to recruit the world's disadvantaged, who are willing to perform the so-called domestic and cleaning services and to transgress the national laws established by immigration services. Their lives are determined by necessity and by postmodern profit. (TONKIN, 2017).

As remarked by Sassen, this atmosphere of economic exclusion and social inequality reflects the discontents of globalisation, which privileges the global and ignores the local. In the essay "The many faces of cosmopolis: border thinking and critical cosmopolitanism" (2002), Walter Mignolo also proposes another perspective toward cosmopolitanism, which

addresses the issues of our post-modern or post-colonial times, as Mignolo refers to our contemporary moment. First, Mignolo draws a difference between globalisation and cosmopolitanism, affirming that "globalisation is a set of designs to manage the world while cosmopolitanism is a set of projects toward planetary conviviality" (MIGNOLO, 2002, p. 721). These definitions lead Mignolo to look into the history of many cosmopolitan projects that have taken place until the present day, concluding that the expansion of capitalism leads to the emergence of more racial and religious conflicts, which become obstacles to the possibility of cosmopolitan societies (MIGNOLO, 2002, p. 741).

For Mignolo, critical cosmopolitanism needs to be developed from the perspective of marginalised voices, consisting of groups of refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers. Instead of relying on the concept of a national ideology, he argues that it is necessary to conceive a project based on the idea of a transnational or postnational world. Mignolo's theory resonates with Santiago's perspective about the cosmopolitanism of the poor. According to Mignolo, critical cosmopolitanism can be established only from the colonial difference, which leads to *diversality* (or diversity as a universal project). From the perspective of the subaltern or marginalised (immigrants, poor, ethnic minorities), it is possible to achieve new forms of cosmopolitanism, developing political and cultural projects that will truly represent these communities, making them actively part of the so-called "cosmos".

Another scholar who also brings up the issue of a new form of cosmopolitanism is Susan Friedman. While referring to religion as a disruptive factor in the idea of national belonging, Friedman focuses on the border-crossing aspect characteristic of the contemporary immigrant experience. In other words, as immigrants carry cultural and religious practices when moving to another country, they may be identified by their religion, which might sometimes lead to strong discrimination. "Many contemporary migrants—the new cosmopolitans—move from societies where their religion is dominant into ones in which they are a minority" (FRIEDMAN, 2018, p. 205). Their visible difference becomes the source of intolerance and the strengthening of the notion of national citizenship excludes their communities from basic citizen rights. In the case of Muslims who have been the target of discrimination in London, for example, it is clear that their religion is a factor of racialization, regardless of their individual practices or beliefs.

In 2019, British-Ghanaian philosopher Anthony Appiah argued that cosmopolitanism "sees human beings as shaping their lives within nesting memberships: a family, a neighbourhood, a plurality of overlapping identity groups, spiralling out to encompass all humanity" (APPIAH, 2019). Referring to the difficulties of coexistence in a

cosmopolitan society, where individuals from different cultures share the same space, Appiah highlights the need for practical agreements that promote political systems that also work for localists, the ones who "value a sense of place and wish to be surrounded by others who speak a familiar language and who follow customs they think of as their own". For Appiah, a successful cosmopolitan project must include citizens from "anywhere" and from "somewhere".

One cannot discuss cosmopolitanism without delving into the powerful role played by big cities when it comes to an overview of a country's social, economic and political configuration. In *World City* (2007), Doreen Massey makes an in-depth analysis of the panorama in global cities, choosing to look into London's changes over the recent decades as a point of reference to understand the context of other metropoles. Massey claims that notions of hospitality and ethnic and cultural diversity frequently linked to our geographical imagination of a world city are not the only relevant aspects of a city's dimension. According to her, there is another geography, which is more comprehensive and external, encompassing a set of power relations that "run around the globe and that link the fate of other places to what is done in London" (MASSEY, 2007, p. 7). Massey refers to the speech given by former mayor Ken Livingstone in 2005, in which he claimed that London "is a city where you can be yourself as long as you don't harm anyone else" (MASSEY, 2007, p. 1). She draws attention to the ambiguity present in the affirmation that London is the city of the future, underscoring that like most cities, London "is both enormously pleasurable and a site of serious deprivation and despair" (MASSEY, 2007, p. 11). Her words bring to mind how episodes of social inequality have become emblematic in the changing context of big cities. Similar to other great urban centres, like New York or Paris, London is easily perceived as a city of contrasts, where poverty and wealth are juxtaposed, where the excluded and marginalised are often despised or feared. At the same time, the rich are free to claim the city as their own. London is also a city that has blamed its immigrant population for the rise in criminality rates and other social ills over the past decades to justify the implementation of more restrictive measures to stop the arrival of immigrants in the UK.

Exclusionary government policies have put a strain on the lives of immigrant citizens living in London, creating an atmosphere in which injustice and social inequality are part of the city's configuration. Even though it can be argued that London fails to accept and integrate differences in its totality, such as ethnic minorities, the city encompasses the many features considered part of a cosmopolitan city or even a global city, as Doreen Massey claims. Since the increasing migratory flows caused by the Second World War, London's

geographical and social space has undergone numerous transformations, driven by new economic needs and political decisions. Although London's rich ethnic and cultural diversity has made it a stage for both celebration and conflict, the source of England's political and cultural power remains in the city. As Paul Gilroy observes: "Time and again, it is London that supplies the answer to the puzzle of what English culture is going to be" (GILROY, 2003, p. 12). Since many immigrants still face the brutality of the immigration system, urgent steps need to be taken by the government so that all races, creeds and colours can live in the city of the future, as Ken Livingstone proudly claimed in 2005.

## 1.7 **Gender in the diaspora**

The contemporary debates over diasporic experiences have considered the gendered character of migratory movements, which James Clifford already mentioned in "Diasporas" (1994). In his essay, Clifford sets the context for a more comprehensive analysis of diasporic processes, which considers words such as "minority, immigrant, ethnic" (CLIFFORD, 1994, p. 245). He also argues that issues of race, class and gender are permanently embedded in the term as "at the level of everyday social practice, cultural differences are persistently racialised, classed, and gendered" (CLIFFORD, 1994, p. 258). Clifford notes that women in the diasporic context are subjected to more challenges while "struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies" (CLIFFORD, 1994, p. 259). Therefore, in light of the experiences lived by the protagonists of the three novels, it is fundamental to examine the effects of the diasporic experience on gender relations as well as to question other aspects, such as the role of female migrant labour in the current world economy, which is discussed by Gayatri Spivak, among other theorists. In "Diasporas old and new: women in the transnational world" (1996), Spivak argues that some issues concerning the role of women in the transnational world need to be investigated. For instance, the incidence of homeworking, which "involves women who, within all the divisions of the world, and in modes of production extending from the precapitalist to the post-fordist, embracing all class processes, do piece-work at home with no control over wages." (SPIVAK, 1996, p. 246). The theorist claims that such capitalist exploitation of female migrant workers evokes how the gendered subaltern subject has become an inevitable part of a global economic process in cities like London. In *Brick Lane*,

this is the case for Nazneen, Razia and the other women who work in the sewing business though they are not fully aware of the large system of production they take part in.

In *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (1998), Susan Friedman argues that historical and geographical specificities should be considered when thinking of practical changes in feminist theories and political actions. Thus, she suggests academics rethink feminism beyond binary constructions and even beyond gender: "moving beyond gender does not mean forgetting it, but rather returning to it in a newly spatialised way that I call a locational feminism" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 18). This locational feminism involves a broader feminist practice that recognises the way the local is informed by the global and the global by the local. Thus, this new geography of identity considers the intersection of elements such as race, class, religion and ethnicity. Friedman articulates the concept of migratory feminism, taking into account the significance of borders, travel, migrancy, and global flows in the development of a new geography of movement. In the subsequent chapters, I examine how gender relations are transformed and negotiated in the novels depending on the underlying space and context as well as other identity-based elements such as race and class.

Likewise, the notion of intersectionality is extremely relevant here. In general, intersectionality refers to the ways different social markers, such as gender, race, class, age and sexual preference, interact with each other and determine how individuals live in society. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term in her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989). Crenshaw defined intersectionality as a method to understand how various axes of subordination operate simultaneously, particularly in the experiences of black women. By so doing, Crenshaw highlights the urgency to address the problems of those who are multiply disadvantaged by placing them in the centre, making room for collective action and facilitating the inclusion of marginalised groups.

As it is discussed in detail in the following chapter, the term Black was then used as a new collective identity, seeking to define those who were fighting against the racist environment and did not feel part of mainstream feminism. The analysis of the interconnection of class, gender and race in women's lives gave rise to Black feminist movements particularly engaged in defining a trend that was significantly different from what had been supported by mainstream White feminism. By examining how the triple oppression of gender, race and class affected the lives of African Caribbean, South Asian, or women from other minority diasporas who were living in Britain, these social movements encouraged

the emergence of the same dynamics in the literary field. As Yasmin Hussain explains: “The label ‘Black’ became representative of a body of literature which provided evidence of economic, social and cultural oppression in any minority framework and within a British context” (HUSSAIN, 2005, p. 34).

According to Avtar Brah, the term ‘Black British’ was adopted by African-Caribbean and South Asian organizations that decided to use it for “constituting a political subject inscribing politics of resistance against coloured-centred racisms” (BRAH, 1996, p. 97). This sense of solidarity between African-Caribbean and South-Asian people in Britain was primordial to establishing a solid and committed collective effort despite their differences. Hence minority women from different ethnicities and classes felt embraced and found a space of empowerment and strength under this designation, which acknowledged the diversity and complexity of their experiences. The literary texts to be analysed explore the intersections of race, gender, class, age and ethnicity, showing protagonists who face hostility within Britain and yearn for a sense of belonging.

In addition, in all three novels, it is possible to see how the issue of gender operates in the pathways of other women characters, who do not move from their homeland but are still affected by the diaspora. James Clifford points out that “the language of diaspora is increasingly invoked by displaced peoples who feel [maintain, revive, invent] a connection with a prior home” (CLIFFORD, 1994, p. 255). For this reason, certain diasporic subjects may see and feel the hostland as a place devoid of meaning or affection. If the process of adaptation and consequent integration into the new land is difficult and painful – for linguistic or cultural reasons or an undesired migration – these migrants will inescapably face one of the possible adverse effects of such dislocation, which is the overwhelming feeling of displacement and estrangement. As the search for belonging is also tied to the search for a sense of home, returning to their country of origin might be the only solution to their personal challenge or social conflict.

I particularly like the way Susan Friedman describes the multifaceted symbolism of the expression “there’s no way like home” in her article “Bodies on the Move: A Poetics of Home and Diaspora” (2004). The first meaning proposed is that “home is the best, the ideal, everything that elsewhere is not. Places elsewhere can never bring the same happiness as home” (FRIEDMAN, 2004, p. 192). On the other hand, the same phrase can mean that “nowhere is there a place like home. Home is a never never land of dreams and desire. Home is utopia – a no place, a nowhere, an imaginary space longed for, always already lost in the very formation of the idea of home” (FRIEDMAN, 2004, p. 192). A possibility that should

also be considered when looking into diasporic experiences is that for some immigrants, home is not a place of comfort and safety but a site of confrontation, trauma and unhappiness. Consequently, these diasporic subjects do not sustain a desire to return to their homeland. In the stories of Hortense, Kehinde and Nazneen, the diasporic space becomes a place where gender relations are transformed, making the return to the homeland impossible for them. Their struggle to overcome obstacles in London eventually changes their sense of self as they become aware of the multiple forms of negotiation available to them. In such cases, the diasporic experience does not necessarily become a burden but rather an opportunity to experience a different kind of belonging. Avtar Brah writes:

> The question of home, therefore, is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of belonging (BRAH, 1996, p. 192).

Hence, immigrants' experiences play a fundamental role in the process of finding where their home is. The idea of belonging has to do more with the individual's sense of self than with their physical location but is often linked to the family, shared values, cultural codes, beliefs, and memories.

The three works of fiction reveal different possibilities of diasporic experiences for their women protagonists, yet, all of them share the conflicts of not feeling they belong entirely to one place, dealing with patriarchal conventions, racial and religious discrimination, and negotiating their way through the instability of the contexts they are inserted in. Once they realise that a true home is a place where they can be fulfilled, free and authentic and, most importantly, a place that can be reshaped and redefined according to their personal experiences, they can make London their home.

In *Cartografias Contemporâneas: Espaço, Corpo, Escrita* (2015), Brazilian professor Sandra Almeida highlights the importance of contemporary narratives by women authors when articulating the complexity of the diasporic space through writing. Literary representations that shed light on issues of gender relations based on different types of dislocations and with dissimilar narrative strategies open the possibility for reflection on this complex spatial configuration. Because this space is inevitably marked by the intersection between national affiliations and subjective experiences, the stories of these women – whether in fiction or reality – are a powerful account of how gender relations can be redefined in this context (ALMEIDA, 2015, p. 66-67).

## 1.8 **Becoming and belonging**

In his book *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (2004), sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that some global developments have undercut a firm sense of identity, which stemmed from the need for a sense of security. Bauman uses the concept of liquid modernity, coined in the 90s, as a significant metaphor to describe our contemporary society, constantly changing and transforming. As a result, Bauman exposes how the assumption that one's identity is tied to where one is born – a country, a nation – is erroneous, "a construed convention". Thus, the idea of a national identity proves inefficient considering the contemporary fluidity of borders and their consequent migratory flows. In "Migration and Identities in the Globalized World" (2011), Bauman states that the current migration pattern transforms the bond between identity and citizenship, individual and place, neighbourhood and belonging. As the sense of belonging affects subjectivity, the identity of the dislocated subjects is eventually fragmented, subject to nuances and changes. As it is demonstrated in the following chapters, Levy, Emecheta and Ali approach identity as a complex process in their novels, in which

> cultural differences and individual and group narratives of history play crucial roles, encompassing both individual experiences of migration and settlement and aspects of colonial history that have shaped Britain's multi-ethnic present (WEEDON, 2008, p. 20).

The dislocations experienced by Hortense, Kehinde and Nazneen eventually result in their awareness and acceptance of a fluid identity, which is inevitably connected to their diasporic consciousness. The three women finally build their pathways to belonging by escaping a fixed identity model and continually renegotiating their ways to find freedom and security. Alongside the common political, cultural and emotional features of migration – the discrimination, the difficulties of settling in and adapting to a new place and the feeling of displacement, all stories chosen for analysis offer a rich source of material for the theoretical concepts selected as the framework of this dissertation.

# 2 REMAPPING LONDON AND REWRITING IDENTITIES IN *SMALL ISLAND*, BY ANDREA LEVY

Prospero, you are the master of illusion.
Lying is your trademark.
And you have lied so much to me
(Lied about the world, lied about me)
That you have ended by imposing on me
An image of myself.
Underdeveloped, you brand me, inferior,
That is the way you have forced me to see myself
I detest that image! What's more, it's a lie!
But now I know you, you old cancer,
And I know myself as well.
*Aimé Césaire*

In *Small Island,* Andrea Levy (1956-2019) evokes the atmosphere of London before and after the Second World War, focusing on the experiences of two Jamaicans migrating to England and two British citizens whose lives are affected by their arrival. *Small Island*, the fourth novel published by Levy, won both the Whitbread Book of the Year Award and the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2004. The novel was adapted for television in a two-episode BBC drama miniseries in 2009, with nominations and awards, such as International Emmy Awards 2010 for best mini-series. In 2019, it was adapted for a stage production and streamed by the National Theatre the following year. In March 2022, the play returned to the Olivier Theatre in London with excellent reviews.

*Small Island* centres on how the spatial and social configuration of London was affected by the post-war migration of people from British colonies in the Caribbean who boarded the *Empire Windrush* to Tilbury Docks, London, in 1948. Hopeful to start a new life in their mother country and escape the limited possibilities in their colonised lands, these immigrants were expected to help reconstruct Britain's war-damaged economy struggling with low labour in many services and industries. It is important to remark that many male immigrants had already been to England during the War, integrating into the British armed

forces. According to data available on the official website of British national archives, from 1944 to 1945, nearly 5,500 West Indian RAF servicemen went to Britain (THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES, 2023).[2]

On January 1, 1949, the British Nationality Act 1948 came into force, establishing the same rights for those born in Britain and in the colonies; these immigrants became British subjects. They were allowed to move freely, work, and settle with their families in any location under British sovereignty. Their British citizenship gave them the right to stay in the UK for the rest of their lives. Yet, their settlement aroused racist hostility; they were often put in a position of social inferiority, and locals often felt uncomfortable, even outraged, with their presence.

*Small Island* brings to the fore, through a literary representation, the history of one small island, Britain, in relation to another, Jamaica. The war ends up being the underlying cause of transformations in the lives of the four main characters: Gilbert and Hortense, black immigrants from Jamaica, and Queenie and Bernard, a white British couple. Albeit in different ways, both couples are affected by the migration process. Levy's direct references to a multicultural but discriminatory Britain permeate the novel. In "Crossing Over: Postmemory and the Postcolonial Imaginary in Andrea Levy's *Small Island* and *Fruit of the Lemon*", Claudia Marquis writes: "By mixing together the voices of the newly arrived West Indian immigrants and British peoples living in England, Levy highlights the contest between socio-cultural orders, which both bind and separate the lives and minds of the four characters central to the novel" (MARQUIS, 2012, p. 38). The balanced alternation of the characters' voices brings fluidity rather than disruption to the narrative, and the intersection of their stories complements the overall historical and social background chosen. The four first-person narrative voices are given the same length in the novel although no pattern is established by Levy in the way she sequences each of the stories. Through each character, the reader is presented with a personal story – experiences, fears and hopes – together with singular views shaped by their culture, class and gender. By the time of her premature death, Levy had written six novels and received several awards.

[2] The terms West Indians and Caribbean are used here to refer to those coming from islands and countries surrounded by the North Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. My use of Jamaica or Jamaicans is associated with the characters of Gilbert and Hortense. Carole Boyce Davies draws attention to the incorrect use of the term West Indians, which was coined by Christopher Columbus. According to the scholar, the choice of the term is clearly influenced by the colonial mentality, which considers the cultural values of the colonizer to be inherently superior to one's own. (DAVIES, 2010).

In her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (2012), Marianne Hirsch uses the term postmemory to refer to the way people belonging to the following generation deal with the events they never experienced but that were passed on to them by the previous generation through stories, images or behaviours: "Postmemory is not identical to memory: it is "post", but at the same time, it approximates memory in its affective force" (HIRSCH, 2012, p. 109). In this sense, although Hirsch focuses on the work of artists whose parents survived the Holocaust, the concept of postmemory can be applied to Levy's writing of *Small Island.*

Andrea Levy's family background is often mentioned when discussing her works of fiction, as the writer openly confirmed its connection with her choice of themes. Levy's father left Jamaica on the *Empire Windrush*, and her mother followed him after six months. The writer's description of her parents' arrival is filled with their shock at the England that received them:

> The things they thought of as quintessentially English — manners, politeness, rounded vowels from well-spoken people—were not in evidence. They suffered bad housing — by no means the plight of black people alone in those post-war days: the signs in windows read "no niggers, no dogs, no Irish." My dad faced incredible hostility when looking for somewhere to live because of the colour of his skin. (MOORE, 2000).

In an interview with María Helena Lima, Andrea Levy, who died in February 2019, said that her writing was strongly motivated by the fact that she could expose the experiences of part of the British population that had been silenced:

> for me, the starting point of writing books has always been about wanting to make the unseen visible, wanting to show the experience of my parents' generation and the children that came after, having to live in this country, quite a hostile environment, and how they cope with that (LIMA, 2005, p. 57).

Through the vantage point of being born in England in the 50s and having her parents' stories as a resource, Levy portrays historical and social events that gain new contours in her fiction. The shift in temporal and spatial settings effectively contributes to the fluidity of the narrative. Levy belongs to the group of postcolonial writers that expose the issues of racism and violence that prevailed in post-war London "[offering] a bleak, sombre view of the city that demythologises the colonial myth of London as the heart of a welcoming site of opportunity and fulfilment for those arriving from the colonies" (MCLEOD, 2004, p. 27).

Thus, the migration experience does not cause any rupture with the colonial story but instead entails a continuation of the inequalities and power relations in a different setting.

In *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (2004), John McLeod draws attention to the use of the term postcolonial London in literature "to foreground the consequences of metropolitan restructuring as they have been represented by writers who have arrived from, or have ancestral links with, countries with a history of colonialism" (MCLEOD, 2004, p. 15). It is worth pointing out that although *Small Island* is considered a postcolonial novel, the story is set before 1962 when the colony of Jamaica finally gained independence from the UK but remained a member of the British Commonwealth. Throughout the novel, the contrast between the actual metropolis and the expectations of those who arrive as migrants, and those who already live there, reveals how social and gender relations are transformed as the characters strive to claim a space for themselves.

In *Windrush – The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (1998), journalists Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips offer a very informative account of the experiences of some of those who arrived in England on the *Empire Windrush*. Upon their arrival, their impressions and memories of the atmosphere in London are revealed through a collection of interviews and personal testimonies, along with the perspectives of their descendants. Some passages of the book are cited in this chapter to illustrate how *Small Island* successfully depicts many factual elements of the experiences of immigrants from the Caribbean whose dreams were shattered and expectations frustrated. Besides, the novel accurately portrays the changes in Britain's social and political configuration once these people arrived and settled there. The *Windrush* has often been considered a symbol of the rise of multicultural and multiracial Britain. The consequent development of a black British identity revealed a turning point in the notion of white homogeneity and exposed the racism in that society. In "Thinking the diaspora: Home-thoughts from broad", Jamaican scholar Stuart Hall affirms that the arrival of the ship "signified the start of postwar Caribbean migration to Britain and stands symbolically as the birth date of the Afro-Caribbean partner black diaspora" (HALL, 1999, p. 1). However, the presence of black people in Britain was already a reality before the arrival of the *Windrush.* Many enslaved Black people had been taken to the region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Britain had also received immigrants from Ireland and other European countries, and by the eighteenth century, the population of London had reached 750,000 inhabitants.

In *Small Island*, the experiences lived by Hortense and Gilbert are representative of the numerous difficulties endured by many of the Caribbean immigrants arriving in London

during the post-war period, hoping for a better life away from the colony. As they become aware of the painful reality that 'welcomes' them, both must find an alternative road to a possible future in the mother country. In the novel, London's cosmopolitanism is questioned as we see Levy's portrayal of the Jamaican diaspora as a harsh realisation that the mother country is not nurturing or welcoming but somewhat xenophobic and exclusionary, accepting as belonging to Britain only those with white skin. When discussing the elements involved in the experiences of the Caribbean migrants once they settled in Britain, the Phillipses point out that:

> The adjustments they faced went deeper than differences in the weather, styles of speech and clothing. It was the colour of their skins which ensured their isolation and began to shape their relationship with British society (PHILLIPS; PHILLIPS, 1998, p. 96).

In "Cosmopolitanism and its Discontents: Postcolonialism and the Immigrant Experience in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*" (2014), Blossom Fondo proposes that Levy's novel should be read in the context of cosmopolitan fiction because of its transparent investigation of "the principles and politics of intricate and manifold belonging" in the diaspora (FONDO, 2014, p. 62). Levy's text touches upon critical issues concerning cosmopolitanism in London, questioning to what extent the city was ready to accept and adapt to its changing outlook after the Second World War. Then, it can be said that Hortense's and Gilbert's stories are emblematic of a failed cosmopolitanism. As we follow their paths in the narrative, we perceive that a feeling of displacement and estrangement immediately replaces the sense of belonging they sought when moving to London. Once they move there, the city ceases to be the dreamy homeland they expected to find.

Levy presents a narrative with a multi-layered structure, overlapping first-person accounts of each of the four main characters, divided into two periods: before the Second World War and 1948 when immigration movements from former or remaining British colonies took place. The characters' stories of dislocation and Levy's narrative strategy for representing such dislocation through space and time offer a strategic representation of the past from a postcolonial perspective. In "Andrea Levy's Dislocating Narratives" (2012), Wendy Knepper argues that the structure chosen for the narrative "implies the need for equal representation and thus challenges colonial hierarchies" (KNEPPER, 2012, p. 1). The separate testimonies allow for different visions of the same historical events – the war and the arrival of migrants – and present the characters' different subjectivities. The shifts in time and space

– before and after the war, Jamaica and England, the streets of London and the domestic environment – offer various points of convergence and divergence in the character's trajectories, reflecting the changing aspect of British society. About her choice to structure the narrative, Levy once said in an interview:

> Four distinct characters began to form in my head, and all of them seemed to demand that they tell their own stories. So four first-person narratives became the structure of the novel. And as I explored their stories, I came to better understand the relationship between the country of my birth and the country of my heritage. (LEVY, 2011).

The stories of the four characters are covered at a similar length in the book. The narrative's non-linear style reflects Levy's choice to subvert the chronological sequence of events, emphasising the characters' dislocations in different places and times and proposing other options for the coexistence of diversity. By following threads often left at the end of each chapter, all accounts contribute to building up the story, offering the reader a chain of interconnected events despite the dislocations in time.

The novel starts with a prologue set in 1924, when Queenie, a little British girl, accompanies her family on a visit to the British Empire Exhibition in London, which King George V had described as "the whole Empire in little" (LEVY, 1994, p. 2). The Exhibition is a factual event that, once embedded in the fictional narrative, exposes the complex relationship between colonisers and colonised long before and after the Empire's decline. The colonial exhibition staged Britain's power as an imperial centre and emphasised its expansionism, its colonies in different parts of the world and their deep connection with the mother country. Through the museum-like vision of Britain's history and its colonies, Queenie sees a representation of the colonised people as objects, portrayed mainly via stereotyped versions of their physical appearances and lifestyles:

> That's when we got lost in Africa. We wandered in, following the syrupy-brown smell of chocolate. [...] We were in the jungle. Huts made out of mud with pointy stick roofs all around us. And in a hut sitting on a dirt floor was a woman with skin as black as the ink that filled the inkwell in my school desk (LEVY, 1994, p. 4).

This first scene also serves as a potent reminder that the colonies were primarily responsible for providing the capital city with natural resources and food. The riches that could be found on – and taken from – their land are also on display, providing an apparent reference to the economic and cultural benefits of the imperial regime: the varied types of wood from Burma, the big-game trophies of Malaya, the coffee of Jamaica, the sugar of

Barbados and the chocolate of Grenada. Then, Levy outlines a challenge to Queenie's perspective when she sees a "real" African man standing near her: "A black man who looked to be carved from melting chocolate. I clung to Emily, but she shooed me off. He was right next to me, close enough so I could see him breathing. A monkey man sweating a smell of mothballs" (LEVY, 2004, p. 5). When he greets Queenie in clear and polite English, "Perhaps we could shake hands instead"? (LEVY, 2004, p. 5), there is a disruption of the stereotype associated with an African man, who was believed to be uneducated and uncivilised. Queenie's and her family's observations about the black man's different physical and cultural characteristics indicate their deep-rooted stereotypical views about black people. However, by showing a black man who can speak the Empire's language well attending the event, Levy exposes a clash between the constructed view of a pure/white British society and another possible hybrid reality not represented in the exhibition.

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), critical theorist Homi Bhabha writes about the formation of colonial discourse, examining how stereotyping works as an effective discourse strategy, which is fixed in the ideological construction of the other: "The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 70). Concerning the issue of race, the visible difference in one's appearance is transformed into a plausible explanation for discrimination, "colour as the cultural/political sign of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural *identity*" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 80). Bhabha goes on affirming that the colonised are produced as a social reality, a regime of truth whereas the stereotypes attributed to them are mere "false representations of a given reality" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 75). The prologue of Levy's novel reveals the tension between the representation of fixed images of African traditions and cultural practices and the presence of real people from the continent who can master the King's English. Bhabha also refers to this tension, stating that the colonised may eventually use some strategies to be heard. This mode of resistance is made through discourse, such as the use of mimicry. "Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualises power" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 86). By copying the language, traditions and other European models of culture, the colonised attempt to be like the coloniser, reducing the possibility of being subjugated. For the coloniser, colonial subjects are mainly perceived as not civilised or capable of appropriating British manners or language. This is shown when Queenie's father reassures her that the African man she met:

> would have been a chief or a prince in Africa. Evidently, when they speak English you know that they have learned to be civilised – taught English by the white man, missionaries probably. So Father told me not to worry about having shaken his hand because the African man was most likely a potentate (LEVY, 2004, p. 6).

The prologue scene also shows the power of events such as the Empire Exhibition, inaugurated on St. Georges's Day in April 1924, attracting over 27 million visitors by its end in 1925. In "Memories of empire: The Empire Exhibition in Andrea Levy's *Small Island* and Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*" (2013), Shane Graham writes about the intentional aspect of such exhibitions in building a specific museum-like view of British history with its colonies. Through imperial exhibitions, Britain's colonial past was shaped according to imperial notions that "commodified their cultures and rendered them as stereotypes that obscured true memories of colonial relations and a pre-colonial past" (GRAHAM, 2013, p. 444). Therefore, it can be argued that most experiences lived by immigrants from colonies or former colonies when moving to the coloniser's land are heavily influenced by the established colonial politics, which reinforces those stereotypes. In the stories of both Gilbert and Hortense in London, we see the presence of the long-held stereotyping and representation of colonial subjects. They are seen as strangers, outsiders, and aliens but not as citizens of British society. They are within London but are not part of it. As Wendy Knepper observes in her article about Andrea Levy's fiction: "Britain, especially London, emerges as an uneasy contact zone of exchange, segregation, and intermixture" (KNEPPER, 2012, p. 6).

Through the voices and stories of Gilbert and Hortense, *Small Island* depicts the beginning of London's present-day multicultural configuration. As the novel deals with two distinct periods – before and after the Second World War – we are presented with the changing aspect of London for those two migrants. Both characters have to rethink their notion of the mother country and reconsider their sense of identity and belonging in the city. In *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), Doreen Massey explains that: "places do not have single, unique 'identities'; they are full of internal conflicts" (MASSEY, 1994, p. 155). In this sense, one should consider space not only as a geographical location but also as a set of social relations. In his essay "O lugar e o cotidiano" (2010), Brazilian geographer Milton Santos also draws attention to the role played by the urban space in the production of interpersonal relationships: "The city is the place where there is more mobility and more encounters. The current anarchy of the big city offers a higher number of dislocations, while the generation of

interpersonal relations is even more intense"[3] (SANTOS, 2010, p. 589, our translation). Inevitably, while immigrants, such as the characters of Hortense and Gilbert, reshape their identities in the city, claiming a space where they can belong, London's boundaries are also redrawn.

Gilbert Joseph is a young Jamaican who proudly joins the British Royal Air Force when the Second World War breaks out: "In my uniform of blue – from the left, from the right, from behind – I looked like a god" (LEVY, 2004, p. 105). Being a black man born to a Jewish father, Gilbert is determined to fight against Hitler's racist ideals. Despite Britain's initial reluctance to let black people join the war effort, the rules were changed as the war progressed, and more men were needed to fight. The men from the colonies were encouraged to participate in the conflict, fighting for the nation that dominated and exploited their land. In *Small Island*, the deep reverence for the mother country, together with the pride for being able to defend it, is shared not only by Gilbert but also by the mother of Michael Roberts, who is Hortense's cousin, when he joins the RAF: "They need men like my son. Men of courage and good breeding. There is to be a war over there. The Mother Country is calling men like my son to be heroes whose families will be proud of them" (LEVY, 2004, p. 49). Although the main reason for Michael's departure is his scandalous affair with Mrs Ryder, who is white and married, his mom's proud words evoke a feeling shared by other Jamaicans who felt honoured to serve their mother country. In *Windrush – The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain*, Sam King, who joined the RAF in 1944, expresses this feeling of patriotism in his testimony: "Nazi Germany was rubbishing Europe and the world, and we, as a part of the British Commonwealth, which was empire then, thought we should help the mother country. We were British" (PHILLIPS; PHILLIPS, 1998, p. 40-41). But these men faced racism and hostility, especially if they were not wearing their uniforms, which protected them, at least partially, from explicit racist remarks. In *Small Island*, Gilbert receives his military training in Virginia in the US. There, he faces discrimination from American soldiers and becomes aware of the institutional law of Jim Crow and the episodes of lynching. When leaving for England, he concludes: "We might have been returning to that British boiling business, but I was not the only boy who was pleased to be leaving America behind" (LEVY, 2004, p. 111). Nevertheless, Gilbert faces ignorance and racism when he first gets to his mother country. On

[3] In Portuguese: "A cidade é o lugar onde há mais mobilidade e mais encontros. A anarquia atual da cidade grande lhe assegura um maior número de deslocamentos, enquanto a geração de relações interpessoais é ainda mais intensa" (SANTOS, 2010, p. 589).

a visit to an isolated Yorkshire village, Gilbert and other West Indians are stared at by the villagers as if they were abnormal people: “The villagers kept their distance but held that gaze of curious trepidation firmly on we West Indian RAF volunteers” (LEVY, 2004, p. 114). Besides, Gilbert finds out that nobody he speaks to in England has heard about Jamaica: “Ask her what she knows of Jamaica. ‘Jam-where? What did you say it was called again. Jam-what?” (LEVY, 2004, p. 188). These conversations lead Gilbert to question his importance to the mother country: “How come England did not know me? (LEVY, 2004, p. 117). Conversely, Gilbert could tell details about British history and geography, all learned at school, where he would “recite the canals of England” and talk about “the railways, the roadways, the ports or the docks” (LEVY, 2004, p. 118). The awareness of his invisibility as a colonial subject is overwhelming because once given a map, he would always locate England, whereas Jamaica seems inexistent to most people he meets. Unquestionably, the most significant barrier to integrating these immigrants into civilian society was undisguised racism. Many passages in the novel show Gilbert being subjected to racist and violent remarks when he first gets to England, mainly from American soldiers who brought their racist ideals with them. Without his uniform, Gilbert is not recognised as a soldier fighting for England but rather as a black man whose presence disrupts the actual social configuration. He is constantly bullied and denied help for being a ‘darkie’. Gilbert experiences racism at its fullest at the cinema when he is told to sit at the back with other black people, although he proudly tells the usherette: “I am a British RAF” (LEVY, 2004, p. 153). The visibility of his ‘coloured’ skin cancels any other type of identity constituent. A big fight follows; Gilbert becomes the target of verbal insults and physical aggression. This fictional account resembles many incidents of unrest caused by the unacceptance of blacks in urban centres in England. Historical studies of the black presence in Britain usually describe the events in Nottingham and then Notting Hill, in 1958, as the first racialised disturbances to occur after the war. However, many violent episodes of racism had already taken place in England, revealing a growing rejection of black immigrants, whose presence was at times equally disliked by white immigrants. The National Service Hostels Corporation, for example, received many reports of disturbances at their hostels between 1946 and 1950. The corporation was used to provide accommodation for migrant workers, including those from the Caribbean and those recruited as part of the European Volunteer Workers. Such hostel riots were mainly caused by discriminatory attitudes from white immigrants against the presence of Caribbean immigrants. The National Archives

website has a series of detailed reports provided by NSHC on such incidents at that time (SEARLE, 2020).

In *Small Island*, after the war ends, Gilbert has to wait two years to return to Jamaica. By then, he is tired of "shivering with winter cold" and "the dreadful sausage and boiling potatoes" (LEVY, 2004, p. 162), longing for sun and heat, spice-up chicken and pretty black-skinned women. However, upon his arrival in Jamaica, Gilbert realises he no longer fits in his home country: "With the alarm, I became aware the island of Jamaica was no universe: it ran only a few miles before it fell into the sea" (LEVY, 2004, p. 163). At this point, Gilbert has become a doubly displaced subject, as a colonised man and as someone who, through his experiences abroad because of the war, starts looking at the world from a different vantage point.

Gilbert's new family setting also signals significant changes: none of his sisters has remained on the island, having moved either to America or Canada, his mom's cake business is affected by the war, and all she wants is to prepare to visit her daughters in America. Gilbert is looked on with pity "for the misfortune of finding myself once more back in their yard" (LEVY, 2004, p. 163). Meanwhile, his dad spends his days drunk on the veranda, "unaware that he was about to be abandoned" (LEVY, 2004, p. 163). After a failed attempt to start a beekeeping business, Gilbert decides to go back to London to pursue better opportunities. "The world out there is bigger than any dream you can conjure" (LEVY, 2004, p. 172), he says to his cousin Elwood, who, unlike him, sees Jamaica as a place of resistance, refusing to leave his homeland as an act of emancipation. Elwood does not see the point in Gilbert's leaving Jamaica because he is hopeful his country will soon be free from colonial rule: "When we get rid of the white man [...] Black man will rule" (LEVY, 2004, p. 172). By portraying the two cousins' diverging attitudes, Levy signals the changes happening in the Caribbean social sphere at that time, when Jamaica slowly became the stage for political activism that inevitably led up to its independence in 1962. More importantly, the different positions taken by Gilbert and Elwood – both born and raised in Jamaica – reflect the impermanent aspect of the island, which is still profoundly affected by the structure and situation of the coloniser's land. Nonetheless, it is also a place where contestation and transformation take place. Hence, there is no right or wrong in Gilbert's and Elwood's points of view but somewhat different forms of identification with their land, which result from their own experiences.

As Gilbert's time away from home provides him with the necessary distance to have a particular perspective of Jamaica, he seeks freedom far from the land "no bigger than the

soles of my shoes" (LEVY, 2004, p. 173). In the post-war period, labour was cheap, and unemployment rates were significantly high in the Caribbean Islands. The Phillipses write: "the domestic life of colonial society was intensely stratified, still dominated by traditions inherited from the slave regimes in which skin colour and class were intertwined and indistinguishable" (PHILLIPS; PHILLIPS, 1998, p. 15). Moreover, economic conditions in the Caribbean became much more unstable after the war as the main concern of powerful economies was the re-establishment of European countries. To some men returning from the war, just like Gilbert, "life in the Caribbean seemed slower, smaller and poorer than it had before, with even fewer opportunities for advancement and self-expression, and governed by the same oppressive structure of imperialist control" (PHILLIPS; PHILLIPS, 1998, p. 45). Under colonial administration, black people had a limited range of job opportunities, so leaving the colony was the best possibility for many of them. This harsh reality involving too much hard work and lack of economic autonomy pushes Gilbert away from his land one more time. Hortense's words convey Gilbert's expectations: "Returning to England was more than an ambition for Gilbert Joseph. It was a mission, a calling, even a duty" (LEVY, 2004, p. 81).

Through a marriage of convenience, Gilbert borrows money from Hortense and buys the ticket to board the *Empire Windrush* to England in 1948. They agree on Gilbert setting up a home for them first so Hortense can join six months later. In the introductory part of their book, the Phillipses indicate the great symbolism of the ship: "Within a decade of its famous voyage in 1948, the *Windrush* had become a symbol of post-war immigration and, for a time, it seemed as if every TV documentary about race or migration had to begin with the image of a line of black men and women filing down the gangplank" (PHILLIPS; PHILLIPS, 1998, p. 2). In *Small Island*, Gilbert describes that: "Most of the boys were looking upwards. Their feet might have been stepping on London soil for the first time [...], but it was a wonder that lifted their eyes. They finally arrive in London town" (LEVY, 2004, p. 175). Although the British government's response to these immigrants' arrival is not shown in the novel, it is extremely important to my research to consider the factual references to the political atmosphere at that time. On June 8 1948, the *Daily Express* – a conservative tabloid newspaper – published the declaration given by Mr George Isaacs, the British Minister of Labour, claiming they did not know who sent the men on the ship to London:

> They will be met at the ship and told how to register for unemployment. The arrival of these substantial numbers of men under no organised arrangements is bound to result in difficulty and disappointment. I have no knowledge of their qualifications or capacity, and can give no assurance that they can be found suitable work. I hope

> no encouragement will be given to others to follow them (PHILLIPS; PHILLIPS, 1998, p. 59).

The growing concern expressed by the government about the consequences of the immigrants' arrival on the city's social configuration and harmony revealed the racial tension during this period. Further, the mother-child relationship built in the colonised people's minds did not last long as these immigrants rapidly became frustrated with the marginalised condition they were put in once they arrived. Soon, there was political pressure to restrict immigration, and successive governments changed their policies to avoid social tensions.

*Small Island*'s focus on the experiences of Gilbert and Hortense underscores the Caribbean immigrants' position on the margin and the hostility expressed by the British, who did not tolerate their presence. Gilbert, like Hortense, has been taught to exalt Britain and even to think of himself as belonging to the mother country. However, he soon gets disappointed at how he is seen and treated when arriving back in London. He and other Jamaicans were "fat as a Bible with the faith that we would get a nice place to live in England – a bath, a kitchen, a little patch of garden" (LEVY, 2004, p. 177), but the reality is quite different from their hopes. Gilbert ends up sleeping in one room with six other men and faces active discrimination when trying to rent a room, just as it happened to many immigrants like him:

> Man, these English landlords and ladies could come up with excuses. If I had been in uniform [...], would they have seen me different? Would they have thanked me for the sweet victory, shaken my hand and invited me for tea? Or would I still see that look of quiet horror pass across their smiling face like a cloud before the sun, while polite as nobility they inform me the room has gone? (LEVY, 2004, p. 177).

More than disappointment, Gilbert feels a great sense of frustration. From the moment he returns to London, the mother country fails to welcome him, give him proper shelter, and recognise the value of his wartime service. Gilbert is not seen as belonging in England. At one point, he challenges the aforementioned colonial discourse when noting: "Politeness has always been my policy. It makes the good people of England revise what they think of you, if only for a second or two. They expect us the colony men to be uncultured" (LEVY, 2004, p. 138). Still, Gilbert is the other, the outsider, a black man who has no right to be in that society: "they tell me even the little children would be outraged if a coloured man came among them" (LEVY, 2004, p. 177). When he is desperately looking for a place to live, many doors are closed by white landlords who refuse to shelter him, displaying the typical British hostile attitude towards immigrants at that time. According to the official archive and

publisher for the UK Government, the short housing supply in London caused the first conflicts between the recently arrived immigrants and the white community. Even if they had enough money to rent better quality housing, many immigrants had to face the fact that some landlords refused to rent to black people. They would be confronted with insulting signs in house windows saying: 'Rooms to Let: No dogs, no coloureds'. This meant that many West Indians were forced to rent homes in the most rundown areas (BOUND..., [202-]).

After several rejections when looking for a room, Gilbert finally finds his old friend Queenie, whom he met in Yorkshire after helping rescue her lost father-in-law, Arthur Bligh, from a riot. Queenie accepts Gilbert, among other black people, as a tenant in her house. Her attitude causes an uproar among her neighbours, who react angrily, expressing disapproval and outrage. Mr Todd, for example, is worried that the new tenants "would turn the area into a jungle" (LEVY, 2004, p. 95). However, his racist remarks do not prevent Queenie from taking in more black immigrants as she needs their rent money to make ends meet. As Klára Kreková suggests in "Diasporic features in the fiction of Andrea Levy" (2013): "Levy depicts – on a small scale – probably the ideal dialogue between the metropolis and the colonies in terms of negotiating and co-existence within the given space" (KREKOVÁ, 2013, p. 26). As discussed later, Queenie's house becomes a critical space for Gilbert's and Hortense's negotiation of their freedom in London.

Despite Gilbert's confidence in his RAF background, finding a job is a massive challenge for him. His applications are constantly rejected because he's black, without any other justification:

> In five, no, in six places, the job I had gone for vanish with one look upon my face. Another, I wait, letter in my hand, while everyone in this office go about their business as if I'm not there. I can feel them watching me close as a pickpocket with his prey but cannot catch even a peeping twinkle of an eye (LEVY, 2004, p. 258).

According to the UK National Archives, even though there was a great need for a workforce, many immigrants faced difficulties finding a job because of the colour bar system[4]. Often, they were forced to accept jobs that they were over-qualified for or paid less than other white workers. In *Small Island*, Gilbert eventually gets a job as a postman driver, but insults and harassment are part of his work routine. One of his workmates openly

[4] The colour bar was a clearly racist system in which the establishment of labour practices, government regulations, and legislation prevented black people from applying for jobs, finding accommodation and even attending places where white people were the majority. In Britain, only in 1965 did the Race Relations Act of 1965 make racial discrimination in public places unlawful.

humiliates him, saying, “I’ll have to wash my fucking hands now I’ve touched you [...]. There’s decent Englishmen that should be doing your job” (LEVY, 2004, p. 262). These examples of institutional racism in British society certainly go against the understanding of cosmopolitanism that was previously mentioned. In this passage, there is no positive attitude towards difference or sense of solidarity but blatant discrimination. McLeod writes: “Caribbeans were within, but not a part of, London’s economic and social fabric” (MCLEOD, 2004, p. 2). Gilbert’s accounts represent actual experiences of that time, which became part of the memories of black settlers who faced episodes of racism. Here is an extract from an interview with William Naltey, who left Jamaica to join the RAF in 1943: “Just after the war was over, I was on a bus, and there were two service people in front of me, one a woman. And she was saying: Isn’t it about time they went back to their homes? And it was the first time that it hit me that, you know, that people were putting up with us” (PHILLIPS; PHILLIPS, 1998, p. 80). In *Small Island*, Gilbert’s tone becomes heavily critical as he debunks the traditional mother image he admired for so long:

> The filthy tramp that eventually greets you is she. Ragged, old and dusty as the long dead. Mother has a blackened eye, bad breath and one lone tooth that waves in her head when she speaks. [...] She offers you no comfort after your journey. No smile. No welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says, ‘Who the bloody hell are you?’ (LEVY, 2004, p. 116).

This passage constitutes a moment of transition for Gilbert as he painfully realises that he is an alien in a place that refuses to acknowledge his existence, let alone his right to be where he is. Gilbert’s disillusionment marks a shift in his identification with the mother country, which invariably affects his sense of self. Levy shows that while West Indians believed they were legitimate British citizens, the native British considered them strangers. Similar to Gilbert, Hortense arrives in London full of hopes. She has studied British culture, language and manners since she was a child in Jamaica and is determined to succeed in finding a good teaching position at a top-level school in London. As mentioned before, the colony of Jamaica was regarded by its inhabitants as an extension of the British empire. Thus, Hortense is the perfectly colonised subject, the daughter of the empire, who can recite English poems by heart and admires the British culture as if it were her own. Her colonial upbringing initially shapes her identity, alienating her from her culture. She never talks about Jamaica and its historical and cultural aspects. Stuart Hall explains:

> In the Caribbean cultural formation, white, European, Western, colonising traces were always positioned as the ascendant element, the voiced aspect: the black, 'African', enslaved and colonised traces, of which there were many, were always unvoiced, subterranean, and subversive, governed by a different 'logic', always positioned through subordination or marginalisation (HALL, 1999, p. 14).

Hortense learns English from native British speakers like Mr. and Mrs. Ryder, whose private school symbolises the institutionalised imperial power in Jamaica. England holds the ultimate key to her future in Hortense's colonialist-educated imagination. In *Imaginary Homelands* (2006), British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie writes about his own experience of growing up under the influence of British education: "In common with many Bombay-raised middle-class children of my generation, I grew up with an intimate knowledge of, and even sense of friendship with a certain kind of England: a dream England" (RUSHDIE, 2006, p. 433). Nevertheless, Hortense's familiarity with this "dream England" and her attempts to be valued and accepted do not exempt her from discriminatory experiences, like being called "a darkie" in public, a term she did not know before moving to Britain.

In the first chapter, through Hortense's memories in 1948, we learn about her conversation with her friend Celia Langley back in Jamaica, sharing their dream of living in England. Both women think that behaving like a British citizen is a sign of superiority. Celia says: "In England, I will have a big house with a bell at the front door, and I will ring the bell" (LEVY, 2004, p. 9). After meeting Gilbert, who talked tirelessly about the amazing London sights, Hortense sees a chance to leave Jamaica and reach her destiny. So, despite Celia Langley's romantic interest in the former soldier, Hortense's determination sees no obstacles in her way. She offers him money to buy the ticket to go aboard the *Empire* to London and have everything settled for her arrival. Their marriage is a business deal, which already symbolises Hortense's determination to make her dream come true:

> England became my destiny. A dining table in a dining room set with four chairs. A starched tablecloth embroidered with bows. Armchairs in the sitting room placed around a small wood fire. [...] We eat rice and peas on Sunday with chicken and corn, but in my English kitchen roast meat with two vegetables and even fish and chips bubble on the stove. [...] I sip hot tea by an open window and look on my neighbours in the adjacent and opposite dwelling. I walk to the shop when I'm greeted with manners, 'Good day' politeness, 'A fine day today' and refinement, 'I trust you are well?' A red bus, a cold morning and daffodils blooming with all the colours of the rainbow. (LEVY, 2004, p. 83).

In "Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel" (2009), Sara Upstone observes an underlying motif when Levy draws attention to the accumulation of furniture and orderliness in Hortense's ideal home environment. Upstone argues that "domestic order was, in the

colonies themselves, rigorously enforced" due to a "desire to present a vision of natural order" (UPSTONE, 2009, p. 117). Undoubtedly, the image of this household in England was built in Hortense's mind through the storybooks she read at school, illustrating England as a place where people were friendly, warm and polite. Understandably, Hortense is later shocked when she discovers that Gilbert lives in a single dirty room with one sink and coin-operated heat, much different from the expected comfortable house with a bell at the front door. Her ideal middle-class domestic life in England is not achieved as she hoped, suggesting that she is neither expected nor welcomed by the mother country. "Is this the way the English live?" (LEVY, 2004, p. 18), she will ask repeatedly.

Upon her arrival in London, Hortense already faces difficulties when getting in a taxi alone as the taxi driver cannot understand her pronunciation. "I need to be taken to number 21 Nevern Street in SW five [...]. I put on my best accent. An accent that had taken me to the top of the class of Miss Stuart's English pronunciation competition…but still this taxi driver did not understand me" (LEVY, 2004, p. 13). Many passages in the novel show Hortense's struggle to understand and be understood by English natives. She feels bewildered, and her failure to grasp the usage of idiomatic expressions more than once, especially when talking to Queenie, signals the difference between her abstract concept of the English language and its practical use by English natives. For Hortense, language becomes a tool to construct herself as a British citizen, but she sounds ridiculous and artificial. Gilbert, on the contrary, does not stop speaking English as a Jamaican when settling in London. His sense of identity is linked to his service and commitment to the mother country and its eventual recognition. Both Hortense and Gilbert repeatedly refer to England as a place where a sense of national belonging can be fostered, as though they could be considered more British and less Jamaican or maybe a bit of both. The colonial discourse is so ingrained in their upbringing and experiences that the difference between being born and raised in Jamaica and being born and raised in Britain seems blurred to them. Again, Levy's fictional portrayal of Hortense's and Gilbert's struggle to deal with a deep feeling of estrangement and the difficulties of being understood and accepted in the place they thought they belonged to reflects the experiences of those who stepped on British soil thinking they were British too. When interviewed by Mike Phillips, Arthur Curling, who joined the RAF, returned to Jamaica in 1946 and went back to Britain on the *Windrush* disclosed:

> I wouldn't say we had our own identity. We were always British. In Jamaica, I can remember, when it was the Queen's birthday or the King's birthday or the Coronation, everything was done the way Britain wanted us to. We hadn't our own

> identity. England was "the mother country" as they used to say, and anything the English did or the British did was always right, you know. [...] It was said by the BBC and it was from England, therefore it was right and you had to agree to it and support it (PHILLIPS; PHILLIPS, 1998, p. 12).

In *Small Island*, the picture of a homogeneous English society is so profoundly rooted in Hortense's imagination that she finds it hard to believe what she sees when going out for the first time. Unlike Queenie, their white British landlady on Nevern Street, whose clothes are simple and grey, Hortense wears white gloves, a white coat, and a hat when out in the street. In their first encounter, she looks down on Queenie, "a woman whose living was obtained from the letting of rooms" (LEVY, 2004, p. 88), as she thinks she deserves more respect for being a very qualified teacher. Two factors fuel Hortense's sense of superiority over Queenie. One is the fixed image she has built up of what an English woman would be like. The other is her lack of knowledge – mainly empirical – about the reality outside Jamaica. A simple run to the local shops proves an eventful experience for her. Hortense is startled by the lack of colour and the uninteresting look of English women:

> Imagine my astonishment when, reaching the bustling street, every Englishwoman I look on is also attired in a dowdy housecoat. And as if the Almighty had stolen the rainbow from this place not one person was dressed in a colour bright enough to cheer my eye. All was grey (LEVY, 2004, p. 273).

Hortense had always been very self-confident, trusting that her extensive knowledge of the British language and culture put her at a significant advantage over other Jamaican women. In a way, she considers herself an excellent representation of the concept of Britishness that her education had defined for her. London's cold, dark, war-stricken and hostile reality contrasts with Hortense's idealised image of the city as a pleasant and cosy place. On the other hand, Queenie is surprised to see Hortense overdressed for the occasion. Probably assuming that Hortense has little knowledge about life in the city, Queenie guides her through the shops explaining what all items are. That is another passage that exposes how the empire knew little about its colonies. Although she does not mind being seen in the street with Hortense, Queenie still treats her as someone from a less civilised place. Queenie and Hortense (coloniser -colonised) lack knowledge about each other. Undoubtedly, the narrative of colonisation affects both characters. According to Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, the effects of European colonisation were not limited to geographical borders but extended to the colonies' cultural legacies and beliefs. In "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America" (2000), Quijano argues that the strategy of power and domination employed by

European colonisers included practices of social discrimination, which imposed specific systems of knowledge and culture on the colonies. Quijano also claims that the creation of race as a biological/colonial category helped legitimise the hierarchical model imposed by the colonisers. Thus, racial hierarchies based on white supremacy were invented and then used to classify natives and put them in a place of inferiority.

In *Local histories/global designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking* (2012), Argentinian scholar Walter Mignolo refers to Quijano's theories, observing that: "Western civilisation managed to have the epistemic privilege of narrating its local history and projecting it onto universal history, which in most modern terms was the global history of preexisting and, since the Renaissance, coexisting civilisations" (MIGNOLO, 2012, p. ix). Mignolo draws attention to the fact that modernity has encompassed a history of economic, political and epistemic destruction of other civilisations for over five hundred years. In *Small Island*, the colonial education received by Hortense favoured Britain's historical and cultural elements as part of the Empire's strategy to sustain the power of its cultural heritage. Hortense values everything connected to the British imperial notions she learned at school, which inclines her to despise Jamaican culture, people, and language. However, the narrative Hortense was taught to believe in does not correspond to what she sees when arriving in England.

Latin-American philosopher Linda Alcoff is another author who considers forms of racial difference to be deeply embedded in specific historical and cultural locations. In *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (2006), Alcoff approaches the concept of identity politics by comparing and contrasting gendered identities with racialised ones, emphasising their strong visual and material aspects. According to Alcoff, race and gender "operate through visual markers" (ALCOFF, 2006, p. 6) in our society, while age, sexual orientation and class are often masked or rendered invisible. To investigate the mechanisms by which race and gender are identified, enacted, and reproduced, the philosopher raises questions: How do race and gender relate to an individual's subjectivity and lived experience? How do they operate in the political sphere? Alcoff also highlights the importance of approaching social identities regarding the historical and social contexts they are inserted in. In *Small Island*, the significance of race and gender in the context of exclusionary post-war British society is effectively represented by the characters of Hortense and Queenie, albeit from different angles. Gilbert is also affected by the experience of racism, while Bernard reveals the discriminatory attitude of white British citizens who have been raised under the shadow of British imperial power.

As we have seen, Hortense is the epitome of a successfully colonised individual. She considers the coloniser's culture superior and believes her British education makes her better than her fellow Jamaicans. She often condemns Gilbert's choice to speak Jamaican English as she sees it as a clear sign of inferiority or lack of education. In Jamaica, her rough and uneducated grandmother, Miss Jewel, looked to Hortense "for all her knowledge of England" (LEVY, 2004, p. 36), representing a chance to assimilate the imperial discourse. Hortense attempts to do to Miss Jewel what her colonial education has done to her, that is, to disregard her Jamaican heritage and accept the coloniser's culture. But the countrywoman resists to follow her instructions despite Hortense's efforts to teach Miss Jewel to speak 'proper English' through Wordsworth's poems. She recites the verses in her way, rejecting the imposition of colonial authority, which is expressed by Hortense's behaviour.

Moreover, Hortense never thought her skin colour would get into her plans. Born to a black mother and white father, she thinks of her skin as light, "the colour of warm honey" (LEVY, 2004, p. 38), which gives her a sense of superiority over other Jamaicans because she thinks white-skinned people are more civilised and polite. By showing Hortense's conviction that a lighter skin colour places her in a higher position in Jamaica, Levy exposes another legacy of colonialism ingrained in the ex-colony's framework. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, colourism can be defined as "dislike and unfair treatment of the members of a particular racial group who have a darker skin colour than others" (COLOURISM, 2023). In "Skin bleaching in Jamaica: A colonial legacy" (2011), researcher Petra Robinson discusses how the social division of blacks by skin tone has strongly influenced Jamaica's social structure. The idea that a person with lighter skin would be more socially accepted and treated more favourably was perpetuated through social and cultural institutions even after the abolition of slavery. Sadly, Jamaican women's self-esteem has been so heavily affected by this idea that many have decided to bleach their bodies to lighten their skin colour.

In *Small Island*, Hortense is so convinced that her father's white skin makes her different from – and better than – other black people that she fails to acknowledge her Jamaican roots for a long time. She is trained as a school teacher with excellence: "My recitation of 'Ode to a Nightingale' had earned me a merit star and the honour of ringing the school bell for a week" (LEVY, 2004, p. 16) and has firm hopes to work in a prestigious school. When it comes to her family background, Hortense emphasises the fact that her father was white and noble: "My father was a man of class. A man of character. A man of intelligence. Noble in a way that made him a legend. 'Lovell Roberts,' they whispered. 'Have you heard about Lovell Roberts?" (LEVY, 2004, p. 31). Hortense repeats these words even

during a job interview to affirm that there is whiteness in her genes. Nevertheless, her knowledge about her father is limited and only gained from what she read in newspapers. When talking about her mother, though, she mentions a woman called Alberta, whose physical features or existence are not worthy of remembrance or pride: “I do not recall the colour of her eyes, the shape of her lips or the feel of her skin. Alberta was a country girl who could neither read nor write nor perform even the rudiments of her times tables” (LEVY, 2004, p. 31). While Hortense rejects her black roots, she firmly believes that her father’s white skin will help her reach a higher level of professional and social success than other teachers. Ironically, even in Jamaica, Hortense’s white background does not place her in a more advantageous position when she is seeking to teach in the Church of England, a prestigious school in Kingston:

> But my interview for a position saw the headmaster of that school frowning, concerned not with my acquired qualifications but only with facts of my upbringing [...] His conclusion – although no word on the matter passed between us – was that my breeding was not legitimate enough for him to consider me worthy of standing in their elegant classrooms before their high-class girls (LEVY, 2004, p. 71).

Hortense’s feeling of displacement in Jamaica encourages her to find some space in England, hopeful that the mother country will value her high skills. Despite her colonial education, which enables her to gain considerable knowledge of British culture, language and history, the visible marks on her skin eclipse all other signs of her subjectivity/identity. She experiences racism as soon as she gets to London, regardless of all her efforts to speak the best English she learned in Jamaica and behave according to the British strictest manners. When Queenie tells her that she “should step off the pavement into the road if an English person wishes to pass and there is not sufficient room on the pavement for us both” (LEVY, 2004, p. 277), Hortense is offended by Queenie’s remarks and finds herself in disbelief. She encounters indifference, rejection and insolence against all her expectations about London, which involves hospitality, politeness and warmth. Hortense’s inability to make herself understood in London and her astonishment when noticing that what she learned about English manners and dress codes do not correspond to the reality around her signals the first step towards dismantling her idealised image of the mother country. The more Hortense learns about the actual British society, the more she realises the British are neither better nor more sophisticated than the Jamaicans.

In addition, Hortense’s hope that her teaching skills and letters of recommendation will help her find a job in a school in England is shattered when she applies for the position:

“It doesn’t matter that you were a teacher in Jamaica’, she went on, ‘you will not be allowed to teach here’. She shook the letters at me. ‘Take these back. They’re of no use”. (LEVY, 2004, p. 376). The woman who does not even look at Hortense’s documents reproduces part of the racist imperial mindset, which is focused on skin colour as an element of (un) worth. Ironically, Hortense expresses discrimination against Gilbert’s black skin moments before this passage, refusing his offer to accompany her because “there is no need for you to darken up the place” (LEVY, 2004, p. 373). Her whole academic background is based on British values and standards. Still, once she is in London, she is only an outsider in the new land, unable to get the position that was only possible for a ‘purely’ English citizen whose skin colour is not black. The notions of politeness, discipline, assiduity and refinement, which her white British teachers and headmistresses had taught her in the colonial school, gradually fade away. Still, she remains determined to settle in London. After the frustrating reception at the school, Hortense begins to recognise herself as a black woman who gradually comes to terms with her cultural roots and starts repositioning her identity in the spatial context that has depreciated her. As it is argued by Hall, “identities are never completed, never finished” (HALL, 1990, p. 225), “but subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” (HALL, 1990, p. 225). The route taken by Hortense is marked by the deconstruction of her previous selfhood and the reshaping of her identity according to the historical and cultural context she is inserted in, which is unstable and decentred. As her identity was constituted by the direct influence of an outside power, she is positioned as the other. However, she is unaware of her otherness or even her ‘blackness’ before the successive experiences of frustration and disillusionment. The inevitable fragmentation of her identity leads her to reconfigure her routes and reconsider her roots. When Hortense says unashamedly, “I will come back again when I am qualified to teach in this country” (LEVY, 2004, p. 376), she is willing to take the necessary steps to subvert the social definitions imposed by colonial relations and occupy a place in that society that she feels entitled to.

The impending crisis of belonging that both Gilbert and Hortense go through functions as a catalyst to a gradual redefinition of their territories in the shared space of London. In *For Space* (2005), Doreen Massey proposes an alternative approach when understanding and practising space. One of the propositions made by Massey is that space is always under construction; “it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed” (MASSEY, 2005, p. 9). This alternative definition of space can be applied to the context of the *Small Island* since the space of London is shown as having no permanent essence. As both Hortense’s and Gilbert’s sense of self are deeply affected by their sense of belonging in the

city, only when they accept its fluid aspect can they redefine their paths in the city. After Hortense leaves the school, Gilbert takes her on a bus ride around the city, which suddenly bears a new meaning for Hortense. The need to walk around London is directly linked to her need to look at herself and find out who she is. To reposition herself in a place where she wants to remain, Hortense also needs to deconstruct the previous idealised image of the city. By naming all the sights she has only seen in books, Hortense does not see London as a perfectly planned place anymore but rather a city with flaws, which has failed to value her.

Further, the fact that people stare at her on the streets and tell her she's black with a look of disdain never becomes an issue. Hortense pays it no mind and ignores the racist comments. What matters for her is how to redefine her path in London after a great disappointment. Gilbert's support is key to Hortense's endurance as his more pragmatic attitude allows him to tell her, "not many people have a dream come true" (LEVY, 2004, p. 384). Gilbert sees a possible future for both in London, different from what they had expected but based on what real London has to offer them. Their relationship as a married couple takes another direction from this point on.

Queenie, who is white, truly British but uneducated, has been deprived of education by her father, who needs her to work on his farm. When she sees a chance to escape her boring life in the countryside, she does not think twice, moving to London to work with her aunt in a sweet shop. Living in London also represents the chance for a new life for Queenie, whose actual name is Victoria Buxton. Her first name and nickname are an explicit reference to Queen Victoria, an emblematic figure of the British empire, indicating her parent's choice to validate the imperial discourse. After her aunt dies, Queenie marries Bernard Bligh, a very narrow-minded bank clerk. The boredom of her life as a housewife and the lack of passion in their relationship is undeniable: "I was married to a man who wouldn't have noticed if I'd come to bed in my gas mask" (LEVY, 2004, p. 216). Besides, the couple has very different views on social and cultural matters. When the war is imminent, and Bernard leaves to fight for his country, a new cycle begins for Queenie despite the violent atmosphere of a war-stricken London. She meets Michael Roberts, and they have a love affair. Michael's character is key to the novel's plot twist, but he does not feature as a narrator. We get to know his story through Queenie's voice in 1948 when he returned to London before moving to Canada. With Michael, Queenie surrenders to her sexual desire without guilt or shame but hides her pregnancy as she is aware of the racial discrimination surrounding her. Levy's subversion of the racialised discourse becomes crystal clear through the event of Queenie's love affair. Although no laws in Britain prohibited interracial marriage in the 50s, mixed-race couples

still suffered severe discrimination due to the prevailing racist discourse. However, Queenie can only challenge the system in the confinements of her house, hidden from the world outside. Her house functions as a space where differences can coexist and personal choices can be made regardless of the judgement of others.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Queenie's first contact with a black man when she is a little girl is filled with amazement and shock. Yet, her first encounter with a black woman, Hortense, is marked by their inability to communicate and understand each other's accents and diction. Also, Hortense is shocked at the precarious conditions of the rooms Queenie proudly rents out to other West Indians. At this point, the issue of race operates together with underlying assumptions about social class. Because Hortense feels proud of her academic qualifications, good manners and elegant clothes, Queenie's shabby house and scruffy appearance reveal an aspect of imperial England that does not meet her expectations.

Conversely, the fact that Hortense is a guest in London and must comply with the rules established on the grounds of racism happens to be natural for Queenie. Her paternalistic and condescending attitude annoys Hortense from the start. Despite the awareness of the prevailing racism in British society, Queenie does not feel any shame or fear in being seen with Hortense in the neighbourhood. This fact demonstrates that Queenie's private sphere has expanded beyond the limits established by social constraints. The decision to rent rooms to black immigrants and the relationship she develops with Gilbert and Hortense further reinforce Queenie's inclination to destabilise restrictive cultural and social values at that time. Her house becomes a place of resistance and security, where the acceptance of difference deconstructs the traditional image of a British household. It represents the possibility of a space that can be negotiated and transformed by both Gilbert and Hortense when trying to find a place to claim as their own in London. In "Embodying Emotion Sensing Space: Introducing Emotional Geographies" (2004), Joyce Davidson and Christine Milligan argue that emotions "have tangible effects on our surroundings and can shape the very nature and experience of our being in the world" (DAVIDSON; MILLIGAN, 2004, p. 524). Hortense's and Gilbert's emotional relations and interactions inside Queenie's house give the place a singular meaning. The lack of belonging they feel in the streets of London is not present there. The domestic environment becomes a shield that protects the black characters from the segregationist world outside. Queenie's house functions as a microcosm of London, where diversity is accepted and differences coexist despite the discriminatory setting elsewhere. In contrast, the macrocosm, which is the city of London, embodies the segregation caused by

racism and refuses to see Hortense and Gilbert as worthy of belonging to its space. We see another London (Queenie's house) within London (city).

In *Space, Place and Gender*, Doreen Massey claims that "since social relations are inevitable and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification" (MASSEY, 1994, p. 3). The dramatic change in the atmosphere once Queenie's husband returns home from war resonates with Massey's argument. Bernard Bligh is against the migrants' presence and wants all black tenants out of the house that once belonged to his family. Bernard's exclusionary and hostile behaviour towards Gilbert and Hortense echoes the beliefs of many anti-immigrant British citizens who thought that "Everyone had a place. England for the English and the West Indies for these coloured people" (LEVY, 2004, p. 388). After fighting in Burma during the war, Bernard fails to return home and ends up in India, where intense violence among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs is already signalling the country's partition. Bernard's observations about the killings and bloodshed are filled with disdain for those who didn't want the British on their land:

> Thousands were killed in Calcutta. Men, women, children, even suckling babies, it didn't matter who. They called it a riot. Those of us who'd been there in the thick of the battle with these bloodthirsty little men knew it was more than that. Muslims butchering Hindus. Hindus massacring Muslims. And who knows what side the Sikhs were on? Rumour said the wounded were too many to be counted, the dead too many to be buried. They were fighting for who should have power when a new independent India comes. Made me smile to think that ragged bunch of illiterates wanting to run their own country. The British out of India? Only British troops could keep those coolies under control. (LEVY, 2004, p. 308).

Though different in nature, the Second World War and the Partition of India initiated the dismantling of the British Empire, disrupting the notion of power and control that it had exerted for centuries in the world scenario. Ironically, Bernard does not realise that the Empire is no longer what it was. In the hope that he has the power to reconfigure the 'mixed' setting he finds when coming back from the war, Bernard associates his house with his idealised nation, where only white individuals are allowed to stay. He simply rejects the idea of a multicultural London and confronts Queenie: "[...] but did they have to be colored? Couldn't you have got decent lodgers for the house? Respectable people?" (LEVY, 2004, p. 360). It takes Bernard two years to return home to Queenie after the war, as he is suffering from the fear of having caught syphilis. Ashamed and 'traumatised', he says to himself: "This war hadn't made me into a hero. It had brought me to my knees" (LEVY, 2004, p. 341). Upon his return, Bernard's explicit resentment is fuelled by his war experiences dealing with

colonised people and his need to preserve and represent the image of a supposedly homogeneous British identity. Imperial and colonial dimensions of the British nation were a crucial and constitutive part of the process of building a rigid notion of British culture and identity. In "Gender Politics and Imperial Politics: Rethinking the Histories of Empire" (1995), Catherine Hall writes: "For centuries white British identities, both male and female, have been constructed through sets of assumptions about imperial power in relation to racialised others" (HALL, 1995, p. 48). Bernard relies on the visual markers of his identity (white skin) to legitimise his superiority over the black tenants, such as Gilbert. Bernard's objection to the presence of black people in the house is supported by his neighbours, such as Mr. Todd, whose speech is also motivated by political reasons: "The government should never have let them in. We'll have a devil of a time getting rid of them now" (LEVY, 2004, p. 98). Levy's depiction of neighbourhood racism is part of a broader setting in which views on race and nationalism are used to express political and social concerns:

> For the teeth and glasses. That was the reason so many coloured people were coming to this country, according to my next-door neighbour Mr. Todd. 'That National Health Service – it's pulling them in, Mrs. Bligh. Giving things away at our expense will keep them coming', he said (LEVY, 2004, p. 93).

Although the scene is set in 1948, the fear of change and the social tension that surfaces in the British setting with the presence of immigrants have been part of its configuration so far. The two other novels analysed in this thesis also deal with the challenges immigrants face from former colonies (Nigeria and Bangladesh) when settling in England. Despite its increasingly diverse population, racism endures in contemporary Britain, where discriminatory practices have produced economic and social inequalities.

In *Small Island,* we perceive that those who live in the hostland are also profoundly affected by the dislocation process of those who leave their home countries for other destinations. This is explored by sociologist Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996). Brah's concept of diaspora space draws attention to the conditions faced by those who want to settle: "Diaspora space as a conceptual category is "inhabited" not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous" (BRAH, 1996, p. 178). Another argument presented by Brah is that diasporic movements are different in several ways – their countries of origin, their reasons for migration and the variety of ways that they settle in their destinations: "The manner in which a group comes to be situated in and through a wide

variety of discourses, economic processes, state policies and institutional practices is critical to its future" (BRAH, 1996, p. 182). This situatedness entails not only the attitudes of the diasporic subject toward the new "home" but also the attitudes of the "native" subjects towards those who arrive. In *Small Island*, we see the perspectives of both groups, whether in the city's public space or the private sphere of Queenie's house.

Besides using Queenie's house as an in-between space where multicultural relations occur (Hortense-Gilbert-Queenie-white neighbours), Levy also exposes Britain's racial divide, dramatising how the British Empire shaped both the lives of the whole nation and those from the immigrant communities. In "Pivoting the Centre: The Fiction of Andrea Levy", Maria Helena Lima comments on the issue of belonging and the domestic space in *Small Island*: "As in other Caribbean novels, the house stands for the nation, the migrant is only superficially, and seemingly temporarily, allowed to occupy thanks to the charity of the mother country" (LIMA, 2005, p. 60). But how can Hortense and Gilbert feel at home in London? In *New Keywords – A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2005), home is defined as follows:

> Home implies both rest and settlement, and movement. Home is the place from which things originate (hometown, home country) and to which they return, or – where movement is blocked – a place of imagined return. It is a place of belonging, involving a sense of family, intimacy, or affinity among those who live close to each other, surrounded by movement [...] Home can also be found at the other end of travel and movement- a home away from home, or, in colonial histories, a home planted in another's land, as in home station (BENNETT; GROSBERG; MORRIS, 2005, p. 162-163).

Nevertheless, this definition acquires a broader perspective regarding the stories of diasporic subjects. Brah points out that home is "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as a place of origin" (BRAH, 1996, p. 188). Unlike Gilbert, who has the experience of returning to Jamaica and then decides to leave his country again, Hortense never thinks about returning to Kingston. For both of them, Jamaica ceases to be a place of imagined return as soon as they envisage England as the place they want to call home.

In *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and the Twentieth-century Fiction* (1996), Rosemary George claims homes are "places of violence and nurturing. A place that is flexible, that manifests itself in various forms and yet whose every reinvention seems to follow the basic pattern of inclusion/exclusion. Home is a place to escape to and a place to

escape from" (GEORGE, 1996, p. 9). Home then is a dynamic and subjective concept, which carries the fluidity of the experiences of the diasporic subject.

In the cases of both Gilbert and Hortense, seeing Britain as home at first becomes an impossibility as they feel excluded, with no sense of belonging there. However, since they don't wish to return to Jamaica, both need to affirm a Jamaican identity in Britain or define themselves as black British within a diasporic community in the mother country. The possibility of a new residence for them in Finsbury Park becomes representative of a diasporic home. In this place, they can avoid the prevailing racist environment and maybe put down roots. Only when racism and stereotyping are not present in their life setting will they be able to feel they belong in Britain. A noteworthy fact is that the reconfiguration of the physical space of London caused by the presence of immigrants happened mainly in the suburbs of the city, where they settled due to the high costs of housing in central London and to escape the constant confrontations with hostile white Britons. These areas encompassed Brixton, Notting Hill, King's Cross and some boroughs of East London. Such neighbourhoods have been frequently associated with race and difference, a direct result of their multiethnic composition that positioned them away from more homogeneous parts of London. Despite the constant attempts to curb their movement in the city, the Caribbean communities, for example, have successfully created their spatial structure in London, imposing their identity marks by introducing particular elements of their culture, such as the Notting Hill Carnival. The Finsbury Park area mentioned in *Small Island* is another location where many migrant communities found their home after the Second World War.

When Hortense learns about the possibility of having a house for herself and Gilbert, who is offered a job as a caretaker of the property, she is still hopeful to live like an English woman in the suburbs: "and a table and a chair here [...] and two armchairs here in front of an open English fire. You will see – we will make it nice" (LEVY, 2004, p. 417).

Although this passage reinforces the idea that having an English home is still part of Hortense's colonial standard, she is now willing to make it according to her standards, taking the responsibility of owning a space she can finally feel she belongs, choosing which aspects of the English culture she wants to keep in her new home. Feeling at home in London for the Jamaican couple becomes possible when they can choose their house, rebuild it, and shape it according to their standards. As bell hooks beautifully writes in *Marginality as Site of Resistance*: "This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonised/coloniser" (HOOKS, 1992, p. 343). The moment

Gilbert confronts Bernard and tells him about skin colour's irrelevance – "It make you white. That is all, man. White. No better, no worse than me – just white" (LEVY, 2004, p. 435), Hortense sees in her husband a new kind of nobility that is no longer associated with her previous idea of white supremacy. Hence, Gilbert takes the role once played by Hortense's father: "Gilbert Joseph, my husband, was a man of class, a man of character, a man of intelligence" (LEVY, 2004, p. 435). In her new house, Hortense will accept herself as a black woman in the diaspora, whose identification with the notion of Englishness changes in the face of her lived experiences in England. Their home becomes a source of empowerment, where they can shape their lives in England.

The novel's plot twist, which leads to Hortense adopting Queenie's child with Michael Roberts, indicates that the baby's only feasible home is one run by a diasporic black couple, although he was born in Britain. Despite Bernard's reluctance to give the baby away, Queenie challenges him: "What about when he grows up? A big, strapping coloured lad. And people snigger at you in the street and ask you all sort of awkward questions. Are you going to fight for him?" (LEVY, 2004, p. 431). Levy shows that racism runs so deeply in British society that a mother chooses to give away her baby to avoid confrontation. If the baby is "with his own kind" and brought up by Hortense and Gilbert, some questions will never be asked, and the child's illegitimacy will not be revealed.

Queenie's awareness of the consequences of having a mixed-race child exposes London's racist and exclusionary context. As Queenie integrates Gilbert and Hortense in her life, she eventually sees them as the ones who can raise a black child, also marked by hybridity, born British and black, to an English mother and a Jamaican father. Despite her guiltless involvement with Michael, the child's visible identity in a discriminatory setting signifies a limit to Queenie's role as a mother. It leads her to give the baby away. Also, the passage describing Queenie's secretive labour with Hortense's help is crucial to the symbolism carried by the baby's birth. In Hortense's disbelief, "I looked back to the baby to make sure what my eye had seen was true" (LEVY, 2004, p. 400), we see the lack of acceptance of the black colour in a white England. To her shock, the baby's placenta stains Hortense's white dress, but Queenie says, 'it's perfectly natural', signalling her long-term embracing of difference in her life. I see this scene as a beautiful crossing of borders, a symbolic transition from one possible home to another, as both women had been in love with Michael Roberts, but only the reader knows of their connection to him. Despite Hortense's great surprise to see Queenie as the mother of a black baby, this event marks her realisation that England can also be black. Here, the white skin hegemony loses its place as the only

visual marker of the British identity: “I never dreamed England would be like this. Come, in what crazed reverie would a white Englishwoman be kneeling before me yearning for me to take her black child?” (LEVY, 2004, p. 433).

Another significant element that unites Hortense and Queenie is their struggle to achieve autonomy and financial independence in a patriarchal setting. The possibility of female solidarity among women from very different backgrounds is discussed by critics such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her article “Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles” (2003). In her text, the scholar proposes a feminist solidarity pedagogical model that values the coexistence of common differences. By focusing on a critical analysis of feminist texts produced in the West, Mohanty draws attention to how women from the global south – black, immigrant, poor – are more constantly seen on the margin, in a subordinated position, with their experiences ignored. Such binary discourse is embedded in power relations that restrain these women from expressing themselves. In *Small Island*, however, Levy shows how the model proposed by Mohanty works for Queenie and Hortense, who develop a relationship unquestionably based on mutual trust and solidarity. By subverting gender and racial standards, both women challenge society’s view of their ideal roles and places in postcolonial Britain. Queenie defies the social norms and claims a space for herself, where difference can exist regardless of outside oppressive structures. Hortense’s attitudes are also audacious when she ‘proposes’ to Gilbert and makes her way to England, determined to settle and succeed. In other moments, when facing racist comments in England, Hortense never allows herself to be in a position of inferiority but rather straightens up her ‘white’ hat and moves on. When walking side by side in the streets of London, both women are inserting a new visual pattern in the city’s landscape, expressing an act of sisterhood, which helps to deconstruct gender and racial paradigms. A black Jamaican and a white Briton sharing the same space implies a reconfiguration of historical and geographical elements, contributing to foreground London’s undeniable diversity.

Furthermore, Hortense’s decision to accept the proposal and raise the black child is symbolic of her strong determination and resistance to negotiating the space that has excluded her. Hortense finally begins to accept that she is a member of the black diaspora in Britain. In the new house in Finsbury Park, both Hortense and Gilbert will have the chance to rewrite their stories in London from another perspective, which might redefine their image of their mother country and homeland Jamaica. The effects of colonisation on those individuals

cannot be erased. Still, as they become aware of the possibilities available, they become potentially autonomous and might eventually feel less out of place.

The city of London also goes through fundamental transformations throughout the story, just like the characters who move around it. We see London as the imperial capital, a city with a strong notion of British identity claimed by white citizens, such as Bernard Bligh. Then London is destroyed by the war, followed by the cold reception of newly-arrived immigrants. Even though it can be argued that London fails to accept and integrate differences in its totality, such as ethnic minorities, the city encompasses the many features considered part of a cosmopolitan city or even a global city, as Massey claims. Since the increasing migratory flows caused by the Second World War, London's geographical and social space has undergone numerous transformations, driven by new economic needs and political decisions. London's rich ethnic and cultural diversity had made it a stage for celebration and conflict. Meanwhile, the source of England's political and cultural power remains in the city. In his essay *A London Sumting Dis* (2003), Paul Gilroy observes: "Time and again, it is London that supplies the answer to the puzzle of what English culture is going to be" (GILROY, 2003, p. 12). In *Small Island*, the space of London gains new contours and colours with the presence of Hortense and Gilbert. They learn how to make their paths in the city by negotiating the public space according to their trajectories. This rewriting of the area through the different perspectives of its inhabitants gives the city a fluid, changing and unstable feature, which eventually echoes the hybrid aspect of diasporic identities. Finally, another Britain emerges within Britain with the birth of Queenie's baby, who undoubtedly represents another aspect of British identity but is rejected by its mother just like Mother country did to her children.

Andrea Levy's work successfully represents the contested social space of London after the Second World War. Nonetheless, Britain's discriminatory setting presented in the novel is not confined to that period. In the years following the arrival of the *Windrush*, Britain experienced steady flows of migration of people from Commonwealth countries every year. However, in 1962, 1971, and 1981, sequential legislative acts shifted, limited and excluded the rights of Commonwealth citizens and their families, exposing the discriminatory aspect of British social and political environments (DODEVSKA, 2021). These people faced constant accusations of disrupting the social welfare system and eventually became the target of a more Conservative government in the 1980s. Since then, the government has attempted to curb the number of immigrants settling in Britain and remove those who have done it illegally. Such practices have affected the lives of black and other ethnic minority

communities. Concerns about population growth and housing plans, particularly in London, have also influenced immigration policies.

Recent times have been particularly challenging for those belonging to the *Windrush* generations. Commonwealth citizens' children, even those born in Britain, have been facing a long-term crisis deriving from the actions of the UK government. Despite living and working for decades in the UK, some have lost their jobs, and access to welfare benefits, were wrongly kept in custody, denied legal rights, and even threatened with deportation. *The Guardian* newspaper has been covering the *Windrush* scandal since its beginning in 2018 and the consequent debate about the British Immigration policy. Changes to immigration law by successive governments left people unsure about their immigration status. Those who arrived as children travelling on their parents' passports, for example, had never been required to apply for citizenship documents but are now under the threat of being detained or deported.

In April 2019, the *Windrush* Compensation Scheme was established when prime minister Theresa May apologised for the treatment given to the *Windrush* generation and announced the payment of up to 200 million pounds in compensation to those whose lives had been damaged. However, as reported in *The Guardian* in May 2021, victims are still waiting for payment, which has been delayed due to the insufficient number of caseworkers (COWAN, [202-]). The Home Office has been heavily criticised by *Windrush* campaigners who claimed there had been 'systemic mismanagement' of the compensation scheme. In June 2021, *The Guardian* also reported the need for the UK's government to relax post-Brexit immigration rules to help companies struggling with staff shortages hire more workers from overseas. What is happening in the UK now is representative of its structural dependency on the availability and continual supply of migrant labour. After gradually removing Covid-19 restrictions, the UK's economic recovery may be at risk if overseas labour does not fill certain skilled occupations. Although employers had been advised to invest in the domestic workforce instead of relying on work from abroad, the government's migration advisory committee recommended that specific roles, such as butchers and bricklayers, be included in the UK's shortage occupation list. The list is an official record of skilled jobs with insufficient resident workers to fill vacancies. On the one hand, post-Brexit tightening immigration policies caused a reduction in the number of EU citizens moving to the UK. On the other, the impact of these changes on the economic sector shows that Britain still relies on the immigrant workforce to perform low-paid jobs that natives are reluctant to take up.

As for the government's hostile environment immigration policy that has caused suffering, particularly to the *Windrush* generation and its descendants, it is clear that concerns

around race and nation remain on the political agenda, revealing anti-immigrant practices that invariably result in acts of discrimination and racial violence. A study carried out by Number Cruncher Politics in 2020 found that racism in Britain is still rife: "When asked about their personal experiences, large numbers of black, Asian and other minority-ethnic people reported incidents of racial abuse – both verbal and physical – with many experiencing attacks regularly" (ASTHANA, 2020). In an interview given to *The Guardian* in August 2021, cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy declared: "The triumphant indifference of the UK government towards the suffering of others – it is in the process of making it even harder for refugees to claim asylum – is a sign that race continues to do its pernicious work" (KOSHY, 2021). In other words, as diversity is still an increasing factor in the British social configuration, discrimination seems to endure proportionately, shaping the experiences of migrants not only from former British colonies but also from other parts of the world. In *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK* (2020), William Shankley and Bridget Byrne observe that:

> Clearly, racisms predicated on skin colour continue to be directed at Black Caribbean and African and South Asian populations and, in comparison to the White British, they are exposed to greater levels of inequality, institutional racism, as well as racial harassment and victimisation. The recent Windrush scandal continues to highlight their more insecure claims to citizenship and belonging, and the 'hostile environment' has also seen a number of high-profile deportation cases that have targeted black and minority ethnic groups in particular. (SHANKLEY; BYRNE, 2020, p. 213).

Central to the discussion over the immigrants' situation in contemporary Britain is the relevance of art (literature, visual arts, cinema) in bringing up critical issues about their trajectories that help us understand the implications of history and politics from another perspective, more than relying solely on data, numbers or graphic charts. Documentary films such as *Hostile* (2022) by Sonita Gale uncover the harmful effects of Britain's immigration policy on 'illegal' immigrants, who were unfairly detained, charged or even threatened with deportation. Not surprisingly, *Small Island* is being staged again this year in London. In the arts and media, it seems clear that the pressing need to unveil what has or has not changed in British society over the last century about its immigration policies is a sign of deep disagreement with the current atmosphere. Andrea Levy once said: "I write because I would like to change the world. I wasn't a great reader until I discovered storytelling" (LIMA, 2005, p. 80).

In “Pivoting the centre: The Fiction of Andrea Levy”, professor Maria Helena Lima points out that *Small Island* “is much more than a social history of Black people in Britain at a pivotal point of the country’s economic and political development” (LIMA, 2005, p. 79-80). Lima acknowledges the importance of Levy’s work in representing the complexities of being black in Britain, but her arguments go further. By presenting the point of view of the white and the black British in parallel through the pairs Gilbert-Queenie, Hortense-Queenie, and Gilbert-Bernard, Levy emphasises the complexity of identity formations taking place when history is also changing. We are presented with a mix of personal narratives embedded in a transitional moment in the history of both the empire and the colony.

The reading and further analysis of literary works such as *Small Island* allow us to understand better the many cultural, social, political and economic factors of the experience of the Caribbean diaspora inside and outside the geographical limits of both islands, Jamaica and Britain. I find it pertinent to bring up two questions at the end of this chapter. One regards the title of the novel. Which small island is Andrea Levy referring to? Jamaica or Great Britain? Or are both linked by each other’s history and culture, past and future? The possibility of ambiguity in the title gives the novel a distinctive feature that reflects multiple trajectories, perspectives and scenarios, all possible versions or fragments of a complex patchwork. The second question is: What does the future hold for children of mixed race, like the fictional baby Michael? Are they going to be seen as legitimate British? Are they going to face hostility and exclusion? One thing is clear. There is a black Britain within Britain, whether in fiction or real life.

# 3 A HOUSE OF HER OWN: FINDING HOME IN THE DIASPORA IN *KEHINDE*, BY BUCHI EMECHETA

> I argue that the concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins, while taking account of a 'homing desire' which is not the same thing as desire for a 'homeland'. This distinction is important, not least because not all diasporas sustain an ideology of return.
>
> *Avtar Brah*

> At times home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference, a world apart.
>
> *bell hooks*

*Kehinde*, written by Nigerian novelist and playwright Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017) and published in 1994, focuses on the lives of a Nigerian family, who in the 1960's migrated to London, where they lived for over twenty years before returning to Nigeria; however, the wife ends up returning to London by herself. Gendered relations in diaspora and in the home country figure as one of the novels' main themes. Additionally, the long span of time that elapses between the protagonist's first migration to London and her eventual return brings to the fore the changes in the socio-political context that affect migration conditions. *Kehinde* depicts the ongoing conflicts for Africans who experience diaspora, dealing largely with the setbacks faced by black women who belong to a strict patriarchal family structure and struggle to overcome the challenges of racial and gender discrimination. As Professor Ashley Dawson observes in "Beyond Imperial Feminism: Buchi Emecheta's London Novels and Black British Women's Emancipation", Emecheta's ouevre not only questions the oppressive aspects of certain African traditions but also condemns the prevalent racism in British society: "Her work therefore offers an important record of the

multiple forms of marginalization to which black women in the postcolonial metropolis were subjected" (DAWSON, 2007, p. 97).

Born in Lagos, Emecheta grew up in a traditional Igbo family. She moved to London in the early 1960s to join her husband, who was attending university. Her experiences as a black woman from Africa living in a Western society played a significant role in shaping the characters and themes in her texts. Emecheta published novels, children's books and plays and also autobiographical works, such as *Head Above Water* (1986). In her stories, Emecheta focuses extensively on the challenging and unequal position of women in both Western and African societies, while also delving into the conflict between traditional and modern values. A prolific writer, by the time she wrote *Kehinde*, one of her novels that addresses issues faced by African immigrants in Great Britain, Emecheta was already a widely acclaimed novelist. Among the honours she received is the Jock Campbell Prize (1978) and the nomination by Granta Magazine as one of the 20 Best of Young British Novelists in 1983. The author also appears in the "A Great Day in London" photograph taken at the British Library in 2004, featuring 50 Black and Asian writers who have made major contributions to contemporary British literature. In 2005, she was appointed an honorary officer of the Order of the British Empire. At the time of her death, she was one of the most renowned women writers from Africa, along with Ama Ata Aidoo (1942-2023) and Flora Nwapa (1931-1993). In *Womanism and African Consciousness*, a book that offers a thorough study of the cultural, societal and political presence of African women, Mary Kolawole asserted that their texts "represent various levels of the quest for self-expression against a background of gender and other related forms of oppression" (KOLAWOLE, 1997, p. 168). It is worth pointing out that both the lasting effects of colonization and the rigid patriarchal social structure that still prevails in some African societies have had a tremendous impact on the history of African literature. The widespread colonial violence on the African continent has led male writers to focus on issues of socio-political concern in their texts. Nevertheless, their commitment to reporting the atrocities on their lands has resulted in an effacement of the predicaments faced by African women. For a long time, these writers provided mostly idealized images of African women as mothers and wives. But Emecheta's novels challenge this pattern, questioning stereotypical images and presenting a more realistic representation of their experiences. Her perspective on African women was greeted by the scholar Marie Umeh as "a welcome occurrence" (UMEH, 1996, p. 190).

Emecheta's first published novel, *In the Ditch* (1972) is also considered autobiographical, focusing on her experiences while living in London, dissatisfied with her

marriage and struggling to raise her kids. *The Bride Price* was only published in 1976, but it was the first book written by Emecheta. At the time, the manuscript was burned by her husband who thought it would shame his family. Emecheta soon left him, taking their five kids with her. She raised them alone while working as a library assistant at the British Museum and studying at night. In 1974, Emecheta earned a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology from London University. By the time she had finished her Master's, she had published two plays and three novels. In *Second-Class Citizen* (1975) and *Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Emecheta reports the experiences of modern African women who fight to end female subordination in a male-dominated world. Her women characters are portrayed faithfully to their insights, differing from the previously idealized and romanticized representations of Nigerian women created by male authors. These novels are known to have established Emecheta's lasting reputation as a major African writer. Through her art, Emecheta criticizes Nigerian men's indifference to the needs of women, be they mothers or wives, and also exposes the pain and frustration experienced by her protagonists in their marital relationships. In the introduction of *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta* (1996), Marie Umeh states that Emecheta is clearly conscious that other factors are unfavourable to the African women's journey towards emancipation inside and outside the continent: "She understands that sociopolitical differences separate African women cross-culturally from women in other societies despite their shared second-class status" (UMEH, 1996, p. xxxi). Clearly, Emecheta gives more emphasis to the constraining aspects of her culture, highlighting the importance of exposing the flaws of social and cultural practices that neglect women's needs and destroy their dignity. When asked if her writing had a feminist approach, Emecheta said:

> I write about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, and African-born, I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small 'f' (EMECHETA, 1988, p. 175).

Emecheta often objected when she was labelled a feminist, declaring that she worked toward the liberation of women and that the tag was from the Western world (DANIEL, 2017). In fact, the usage of the term feminism has long been under scrutiny. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzadúa, co-editors of a path-breaking anthology [1981] of texts written by "radical women of color" emphasized that skin colour is the main characteristic, though not the only one, that sets them apart from mainstream feminists (MORAGA; ANZALDÚA, 1983, p. 23). In "Under Western Eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses" (2003b),

Chandra Mohanty already noted that Western feminists often approach the study of Third World or non-western women from a position of privilege and assumptions rooted in colonial discourses. Such an approach perpetuates a binary representation of Western women as liberated and Third World women as oppressed victims. This homogeneous representation oversimplifies women's diverse experiences and identities from different parts of the world. Mohanty calls for a more intersectional approach to avoid the reinforcement of stereotypes and colonial power dynamics. More recently, the need for reflection on the definition and use of the concept of feminism continues to be an issue addressed by contemporary critics, including Brazilian scholars. Simone Schmidt, in "Sexo, raça e gênero na lógica colonial: o que contam as mulheres" (2016), draws attention to the distorted concept of feminism that is "repeatedly defined as an embarrassing radicality to be rejected and denied"[5] (SCHMIDT, 2016, p. 14, our translation). While referring to interviews with Mozambican writer Paulina Chiziane, she reinforces the notion that the feminist project needs to consider two points: first, the difference between gender and feminism (since many men are feminists); second, the possibility of a broader type of feminism, which considers new experiences. Schmidt proposes "a feminist horizon built on its differences" [6] (SCHMIDT, 2016, p. 16, our translation). As Regina Dalcastagne reminds her readers, "when we use the term woman, it is necessary to remember that the feminine condition is always plural"[7] (DALCASTAGNE, 2019, p. 54, our translation).

Taking into consideration the time frame of Emecheta's work, many critics have resorted to Alice Walker's use of womanist theory when discussing her novels. The first African-American woman to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983, Walker publicized Womanism as a platform that advocated for the rights and concerns of marginalized women, especially those from the African-American community. The term came to prominence with Walker's use in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). Walker's definition of a womanist is "A black feminist or feminist of colour [...] Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behaviour [...] Interested in grown-up doings. [...] Responsible. In charge. Serious" (WALKER, 1983, p. xi). The relationship between womanism and feminism is defined by

[5] In Portuguese: "erigido reiteradamente como uma radicalidade embaraçosa, a ser afastada e negada" (SCHMIDT, 2016, p. 14).
[6] In Portuguese: "a construção de um horizonte feminista construído em suas diferenças" (SCHMIDT, 2016, p. 16).
[7] In Portuguese: "quando falamos em mulher é preciso lembrar que a condição feminina é, sempre, plural" (DALCASTAGNE, 2019, p. 54).

Alice Walker as ‘Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender’. As it is mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation, the triple bind (gender, class and race) is also recognized by the theory of intersectional feminism (CRENSHAW, 1989).

In many of Emecheta’s novels, the intersections of gender, race and class affect the lives of women characters. There is also a concern for Black women’s growth and personal development, symbolizing the womanist journey towards their empowerment. In *Kehinde*, for example, Emecheta explores the potential of the protagonist to achieve and embrace her individuality, surpassing the limiting expectations imposed on her by cultural traditions because she is a wife and a mother. We also see in Kehinde’s view about her marriage to Albert the possibility of a ‘womanistic’ gender interaction, which involves a yearning for complementation and balance between men and women, rather than conflict, power battle or competition. In the novel, gendered relations together with prescribed gender roles are complicated by the diasporic experience that brings to the fore the clash of values between the different patriarchal structures at work in Nigeria and Great Britain.

In *Kehinde*, the protagonist who bears the same name as the novel’s title has a comfortable life in London with her husband and kids. When Albert decides to move back to Nigeria, Kehinde is hesitant, but eventually she joins him, quitting her job in London. Upon her arrival in Lagos, she is shocked to find out that he has married another woman and had another child. The return is disastrous. Due to extreme frustration, feelings of estrangement and major personal disappointments in her country of birth, Kehinde decides to go back to England and restore her sense of self in the diaspora again. In *Kehinde*, the theme of settling in a new home, be it the diasporic one or the former homeland is explored together with the role played by cultural traditions in the process of identity formation. Emecheta’s depiction of Kehinde’s search for independence questions the limit of following cultural traditions and the way the adopted country can eventually become home for the protagonist.

In an interview with Oladipo Joseph Ogundele in 1994, when asked how she conceived her function as a writer, Emecheta said the following: “I don’t have a particular mission. I like to tell the world our part of the story while using the voices of women. Women in our area are silenced a lot. Even amongst writers, you will notice that there is a bias towards male writers” (OGUNDELE, 1996, p. 449). Her storytelling is undoubtedly a narrative from the point of view of the marginalized, the other, the oppressed, or the subaltern subjects, as Spivak puts it. It can be affirmed that this alternative narrative is then postcolonial, although Emecheta does not use the word to describe her work. Another significant element in Emecheta’s writing is the combination of her African heritage with the

experience of living in Britain most of her life, resulting in the creation of a hybrid text, a text that flows back and forth between the two cultures, providing the reader with "a cross-cultural reading experience", as suggested by Katherine Fishburn in the preface of her book *Reading Buchi Emecheta: Cross-Cultural Conversations* (1995).

Undoubtedly, the reading of *Kehinde* raises awareness of the subordinated condition of women in Nigeria and of the various degrees and types of available opportunities for men and women in a system of patriarchy that remains intact. Since they are expected to play different economic and political roles in Nigerian society, men and women do not face equal challenges or limitations. In the Igbo culture, for example, polygamy is socially accepted and even encouraged, allowing only the man to take as many wives as he wants. Women then are expected to accept this practice and centre their lives on taking care of the house and the family. In *Kehinde*, Albert is not polygamous when still living in London. In fact, one of the ostensible affinities between him and Kehinde before getting married was their disapproval of polygamy. However, his behaviour changes when he returns to Nigeria. There he feels entitled to keep the tradition of his homeland alive, dismissing his previous commitment to Kehinde, who "related to Albert as a friend, a compatriot, a confidant" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 6).

In the novel, the many dislocations the main character has suffered since birth are revealed through her memories. Both her twin sister, Taiwo, and her mother die during labour. As the death of a twin is considered bad luck in Igbo tradition, Kehinde is raised by her aunt in Lagos, believing she is her real mother. Kehinde is given the Christian name of Jacobina, which marks the erasure of both her birth name and the link with her real family heritage. In "Buchi Emecheta: Storyteller, Sociologist and Citizen of the World" (2020) professor Pamela S. Bromberg traces the development of Emecheta's writing style assessing the early autobiographical novels up to *Kehinde*. Bromberg praises Emecheta's technique in *Kehinde* arguing that the novel's "direct style retains the democratic ethical standards articulated and defended in her interviews while attaining a mature level of artistic complexity in its narrative form" (BROMBERG, 2020, p. 182). The professor also points out that Emecheta's experiences as an immigrant in London led to the unfolding of a more nuanced and crafted narrative technique, with diverse points of view and subplots. The artistic complexity is partly achieved in a narrative that is not linear. Thus, the protagonist's past experiences are revealed through flashbacks that come in the form of first-person narration, interrupting the flow of the third-person account that prevails in the novel. Each chapter has a title revealing its main focus and setting the tone of Emecheta's storytelling style. Professor

Leila Harris argues that "The absence of linearity in the fictional narrative seems to highlight the theme of displacement, which is crucial for the development of the novel"[8] (HARRIS, 2018, p. 12, our translation). Emecheta uses a variety of devices in *Kehinde* such as the shift between first and third-person narrators, the use of flashbacks, and the inclusion of letters and passages in Igbo, Pidgin English and standard English, all elements that contribute to the hybrid character of her text. This strategy also provides a view into the complex journey of the protagonist, who often deals with a state of dual existence, either because of her diasporic experience or the spiritual presence of her Taiwo. Through her flashbacks, we learn that Kehinde finds out about the death of her twin sister when she is five years old. The third-person narrator describes thoroughly the moment Kehinde sees an *iyabeji*, a Yoruba mother of twins with her babies, and how this confirms her intuition that she also had a twin sister. After that, Aunt Nnebogo tells Jacobina that her dead twin sister is her personal spiritual guardian, changing her name back to Kehinde. At eleven, she is taken to her father's house, losing contact with her aunt. Even though she has several brothers and sisters, Kehinde develops stronger affective ties with her older sister, Ifeyinwa. She is sent off to a boarding catholic school for years and ends up rejecting some aspects of her own Nigerian culture, such as polygamy. After completing her studies, Kehinde marries Albert Okolo and they move to London, remaining there for eighteen years. Despite the long time away from her country of birth, Kehinde still has Nigeria as a strong reference, making an effort to preserve Nigerian traditions in the family's routine. At dinner, she serves ground rice and *egusi* soup to her family in spite of her kids' complaints about the monotony of the Nigerian meal. Kehinde speaks perfect English but chooses to use Pidgin when talking to her best friend Moriammo. These attitudes reflect her intention to preserve the connection with her homeland, keeping her notion of home and identity intact. Strongly attached to her Nigerian roots, Kehinde draws clear limits between her home cultural practices and the British ones. James Clifford suggests that women in diasporic spaces remain connected to a 'home' culture and tradition: "Fundamental values of propriety and religion, speech and social patterns, and food, body, and dress protocols are preserved and adapted in a network of ongoing connections outside the host country" (CLIFFORD, 1994, p. 314).

Although there is no clear time reference in the narrative, it is implied that Albert and Kehinde settle in London in the early 1960s, when Nigeria was already independent from

[8] In Portuguese: "A ausência de linearidade da narrativa ficcional parece colocar em relevo a temática dos deslocamentos, crucial para o desenvolvimento do romance" (HARRIS, 2018, p. 12).

Britain. The country was a British colony from 1884 until 1960. Following World War II, many Nigerians departed the country to pursue higher education in foreign countries, mainly in the UK and the USA. Upon completing their studies, they returned to Nigeria as highly qualified professionals. After independence from Britain in 1960, the ethnoreligious conflicts between the Northern Islamic and Southern Christian groups resulted in many involuntary migrations in the country. Civil and political unrest combined with high unemployment, and inflation contributed to many young people seeking opportunities abroad (INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, 2023). According to a report published by the UK government's official website, Nigeria had the highest number of migrants to the UK in the year ending June 2022 and has become the third largest nationality group in the country (UNITED KINGDOM, 2023). Their main area of residence is Peckham, located in north London and known as London's little Lagos.

*Kehinde* is probably set in the mid-70s when Nigeria experienced a significant increase in oil production that attracted foreign money but later led to an economic crisis and civil unrest. The opening chapter entitled 'The Letter' describes the beginning of a serious disagreement between the couple, who apparently had had a harmonious relationship until then. A letter from Albert's sisters in Nigeria urges him to return 'home' and their excitement about the country's possible prosperity triggers Albert's desire to return to his country of birth, where an economic boom is starting to happen. But Kehinde questions the whole enterprise, making clear she doesn't share her husband's enthusiasm:

> 'They want you to return home? What of us?' Kehinde asked, bringing a pot of tea. 'They have been hinting at it for a very long time, now they've got the courage to spell it out. Return home, return home indeed! They keep forgetting that you left Nigeria a young bachelor and that now you have a wife and kids. Return home, just like that, enh?' (KEHINDE, 1994, p. 1).

At this point, Kehinde has a good position at Barclays Bank in London and is about to be promoted. She gets a better salary than her husband and pays the mortgage on their house. Whilst they have a comfortable life with stable jobs, a Jaguar and a 'typical East London mid-terrace house', the possibility of material success in Nigeria captivates Albert, who feels nostalgic for his homeland and does not regard London as his home: "Nigeria needs us. The government says so. Even the Europeans are leaving their countries and rushing to Nigeria" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 3). The context of an attractive 'neocolonial' Nigeria is criticized by Kehinde, who immediately disagrees with Albert's drive by materialistic ideals. During the same conversation, the cultural gap within the family is brought up by their son Joshua, who

comments that the couple always chooses to speak Igbo when they want their kids out of the conversation. Kehinde confronts him, saying he is the one who refuses to learn his 'mother tongue'. But for Joshua, using Igbo is not a possibility. As he was born in England and has never been to Nigeria, choosing English is natural even though his parents speak their first language at times. For Kehinde, though, resorting to Igbo is another way of keeping the tradition of Nigeria alive.

The first chapter shows that Kehinde and Albert have had an open communication channel, discussing issues and making plans together when they are inside 'their' house and away from the public gaze. As Kehinde is fully aware of the patriarchal structure of Nigeria where "the home belonged to the man, even if the woman spent her entire life keeping it in order" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 4), we see how her cultural background conflicts with her socioeconomic position in the diaspora. In England, she has a good job and higher status than her husband which entitles her to a sense of autonomy unavailable to a woman in her homeland. In "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return", William Safran explains:

> Some diasporas persist – and their members do not go home – because there is no homeland to which to return; because, although a homeland may exist, it is not a welcoming place with which they can identify politically, ideologically or socially; or because it would be too inconvenient and disruptive, if not traumatic, to leave the diaspora (SAFRAN, 1991, p. 91).

The prospect of losing the comfort and mobility Kehinde has earned over the years scares her together with the threat of a radical change in her relationship with Albert. Kehinde performs the role of the obedient and submissive wife, as expected from a woman according to her homeland practices. In many instances, she frequently downplays her own worth to boost his ego, just like a proper Nigerian wife. Still, she is aware that the equality in her marriage with Albert is not present in her sister's polygamous relationship in Lagos.

Albert and Kehinde's relationship can be analysed through the performative dimension of their gender identity. The concept of gender performativity, formulated by Judith Butler (1990), argues that "gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes [...] gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing" (BUTLER, 1990, p. 33). Gender then is not a stable category or essence but rather a fluid and dynamic process that is created and maintained within power structures, such as patriarchy, through repeated acts of interpretation. As a socially constructed category, gender roles are produced collectively to

serve specific purposes. Butler criticizes the institutions of marriage and motherhood, which reaffirm the so-called feminine traits that restrict the female body to submissive roles. She claims that there is no fixed relationship between one's body and one's gender. In this sense, being born a woman does not necessarily mean you must have a child at any cost because your body 'was designed' for this. Therefore, the liberation of the female body from such essentialist constructions entails a direct confrontation of patriarchal assumptions that are present in societies like Nigeria. In the case of Kehinde's configuration in London, despite her professional success and financial independence, she performs the feminine roles of a submissive wife and devoted mother, allowing Albert to make decisions for her and not taking credit for buying the family house. She was fully aware that

> It was because of her position in the bank that they had been able to get a mortgage. But a good wife was not supposed to remind her husband of such things. When Kehinde said 'your house', she was playing the role of the 'good' Nigerian woman. Conversely, when he said 'our house', he was being careful not to upset her. After almost sixteen years of marriage, they played this game without thinking (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 4).

In "Gender Performativity in Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde*" (2017) Velma Mohan demonstrates that in the novel Emecheta exposes and questions the constant essentialization of gender identities in the Nigerian context.

> A girl is taught to essentialize her gendered identity from childhood. She is instructed to look beautiful, dress properly, sacrifice for her brothers, perform the duties of a wife without fail and take care of her children. As a result, she maintains her physical appearance and dresses attractively for the male gaze. (…) Traits such as caring, nurturing, forgiving, and protecting are fed to her. It is this training Kehinde received in her childhood that compels her to perform the role of a caring and nurturing mother (MOHAN, 2017, p. 86).

Conversely, significant privileges are bestowed upon a son in private and public spaces. He is raised to align with the characteristics and behaviours typically associated with masculinity. He is also taught the notion that men have authority while women are subordinate. In addition, everything a woman possesses, – children, property and even her body- is considered to belong to a man. This can be seen when Joshua, Kehinde's son, is encouraged by his father to claim his right to the house in London despite knowing that Kehinde's money was used to pay the mortgage. Beyond question, this constant emphasis on fixed masculine and feminine behaviours and practices reinforces the notion that gender identities are fixed and essentialized.Nevertheless, through Kehinde's journey, Emecheta

proposes the deconstruction of such a performance, redefining the protagonist's prescribed understanding of her gender identity and her role as a wife and as a mother. Kehinde's experiences, mainly after her return to Nigeria, will slowly reshape and resignify her sense of identity and belonging, problematizing the fixed notion of female gender roles she has internalized mainly because of her cultural background.

Albert's plans to return home are threatened by the news that Kehinde is pregnant. He is unable to hide his surprise and indignation, suggesting that she have an abortion for the family's sake. He knows that a third child would prevent Kehinde from getting the promotion and would make them use their savings. The dialogue between Albert and Kehinde reveals the extent of Albert's alignment with Nigerian patriarchal values while also disclosing his real motivation for returning to Nigeria. Holding Kehinde solely accountable for getting pregnant, he shows total disregard for her feelings or opinions on the matter. Although abortion is highly forbidden in Igbo culture, Albert contradicts his cultural practices to serve his own interests: "He had already made the decision to return home. It was only a matter of when. After eighteen years, he pined for sunshine, freedom, easy friendship, warmth" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 6). Though ostensibly receptive to his sisters' appeal and eager to participate in his country's economic boom, Albert's main motivation to return to Lagos is primarily related to his sense of weakness and inferiority in London, where his job does not make him proud and Kehinde's higher salary impacts his self-esteem. His awareness of a different scenario in Nigeria does not scare him but rather gives him hope to achieve a different status in a society where women are powerless. Although he's been in London for almost twenty years, the city becomes "a strange land, where you do things contrary to your culture" from the moment he sees abortion as the only way to move forward with his plans. In this sense, Emecheta shows how Albert's articulation of traditional values differs from Kehinde's because he is a man. Questioned by his workmate, he says: "I haven't even told her yet. But she will do what I say, after a lot of tantrums. Stupid country, where you need your wife's money to make ends meet" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 15).

The decision to end her pregnancy is not easy for Kehinde, who resents Albert's selfishness and lack of complicity after so many years. Besides going against her cultural practices, she feels undervalued and disrespected by the man she has always considered to be her best friend: "she might have loved him devotedly for the rest of her life. But he did not" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 22). Eventually, Kehinde agrees to have the abortion under the condition of having a tubal ligation. By so doing, she aims to eliminate any chance of Albert's

controlling her reproduction in the future. In an attempt to regain control over her own body, Kehinde hints she doesn't want to continue to play a submissive role:

> When we get to Nigeria, if I am really going with you, I am going to enjoy myself. I'm not going to get there and start carrying babies again. If I can't have this one here, then I'm not having any there. And I may not even go with you. My dreams about home are confused. I haven't a clear vision what I'm supposed to be looking for there (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 22).

As Kehinde is uncertain about where her home is, she is unsure about where she belongs to. This identity crisis is triggered by Albert's sudden, single-handed decision to return to Nigeria affects her sense of stability and security both in the household in London and in her relationship with her husband. From this moment on, the narrative follows Kehinde's journey towards self-awareness, spurring memories related to the circumstances of her birth and childhood that help explain her fragmented identity. When the couple is on the way to the abortion clinic, Kehinde's thoughts are interrupted by the voice of her dead twin, Taiwo, who 'visit' her in many instances in the novel to guide her and give advice. The act of terminating her pregnancy leads Kehinde to reflect on her birth and life and death. The narrator then changes to first-person and the story of her early years of life is revealed, as a series of flashbacks that expose her early dislocations:

> My mother and my sister were dead. Nobody wanted me. Luckily, Aunt Nnebogo came to visit, and she took me away from all those people who accused me of being a child who brought bad luck. But Aunt Nnegobo took the risk, and it paid her. She took me away to where she lived, in far-off Lagos, where the Yoruba people believe that twins bring luck, and give them special names: Taiwo and Kehinde. They say that as soon as I came into Aunt Nnegobo's life, her fish business flourished (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 18).

This passage foreshadows Kehinde's own path to personal empowerment. Her memories dwell on the good luck she brought to her aunt's life, who became independent and "was rich enough to be able to afford the burial of her mother" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 18). This chapter, using primarily first-person narration, focuses on how Kehinde's cultural roots shape her character and her sense of place in the world. Her deep connection to her Taiwo is an essential element of Kehinde's fragmented subjectivity as her twin appears in moments of reflection, doubt, fear and also strength. Emecheta's knowledge of Igbo and Yoruba traditions is evident in her writing. Not surprisingly, the fusion of both Nigerian customs in Kehinde's upbringing conveys the hybrid character of her identity, which impacts her notions of home and belonging. According to Yoruba *ibeji* belief, a Taiwo exercises her spiritual power over a

Kehinde. In the novel, Kehinde's spiritual communication with her Taiwo becomes a source of empowerment, which helps her navigate the complexities of her journey towards self-actualization. On this path, some other deeply ingrained beliefs are deconstructed, mainly after the return to Nigeria and the shock at the change in Albert's behaviour.

The chapter entitled 'Another Patient' shows Kehinde's conversation with a young woman who is also at the clinic to terminate her pregnancy. Their dialogue is brief but it highlights the dilemma of embracing or rejecting motherhood and the way the decision affects each woman differently. When Kehinde says "My husband will kill me if I don't. But really, inside, I'm confused. Part of me doesn't want any more children, another part wants to keep this one, just this one" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 26), we see the ambivalent position she finds herself in. The young woman, on the other hand, is sure she wants to have the baby, but the decision not to keep it has been made based on practical factors. Her sadness moves Kehinde, who sees in the white girl the hopeless feeling of not being able to be autonomous. Both women, albeit from different backgrounds and with unrelated stories, are caught in the same struggle about having control over their bodies.

It is worth pointing out that despite being celebrated in all societies, maternal ideals are more closely intertwined with a woman's identity in patriarchal cultures, as they emphasize a woman's primary role as a reproductive entity. The concept of motherhood as a defining aspect of a woman's existence has been widely discussed by scholars and critics of African literature and culture. According to Remi Akujobi, in "Motherhood in African Literature and Culture" (2011),

> It is no longer a secret that the Nigerian woman considers herself a real woman only when she has proved herself to be fertile and "the halo of maternity" shines over her. This holds true for most women in Africa where the index of motherhood is used to define "real" women or responsible women. This is so the sense that motherhood is a prerequisite for social acceptance, many non-mothering women experience feelings of rejection and low self-esteem (AKUJOBI, 2011, p. 4).

In many of Emecheta's novels, the central characters reveal what is like to be an African woman in a patriarchal society where the ability to bear children defines her value. In *Kehinde*, the abortion is a turning point for the protagonist. During the procedure, a dream reveals that she is aborting her father's *chi*, his spiritual guide. She hesitantly tells Moriammo: "The child I just flushed away was my father's *chi*, visiting me again. But I refused to allow him to stay in my body" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 32). From this moment on, Kehinde's marriage starts going downhill: "She glanced at Albert as if he were a new person, his profile

clear against the window of the car. He had nothing to offer her" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 33). As Kehinde's identification with her traditional religious upbringing is very strong, feelings of guilt and regret overwhelm her. While she remains frustrated and uncertain about the return to Nigeria, Albert is inspired by the possibility of playing the traditional role assigned to men in the Igbo culture. Feelings of displacement and the estrangement from western values drive him to seek comfort in the prospect of regaining power in a patriarchal setting. In a conversation with his workmate Phahbu, Albert discloses his hopes:

> But I want to go back to the way of life my father had, a life of comparative ease for men, where men were men and women were women, and one was respected as somebody. Here, I am nobody, just a storekeeper. I'm fed up with just listening to my wife and indulging her [...]. No, to be at home is better. There I can have my drink on the verandah, and people will pay attention to me, including my wife (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 35).

The memory of his father's lifestyle in Nigeria, where men are granted certain privileges because of patriarchal traditions, pushes Albert to escape from the westernized position he finds himself in. His desire to return can be conceived much more as a restoration of the patriarchal order than a longing for his country of birth. The third-person narrator discloses Albert's thoughts to the reader:

> Kehinde would learn when they got home how she was supposed to behave. Here, she was full of herself, playing the role of a white, middle-class woman, forgetting she was not only black, but an Igbo woman, just because she worked in a bank and earned more than he did. [...] As Kehinde was perfectly well aware, behind the veneer of westernization, the traditional Igbo man was alive and strong, awaiting an opportunity to reclaim his birthright (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 35).

The chapter entitled 'The Party' reveals crucial aspects of both Albert's and Kehinde's subjectivities. Before departing for Lagos, Albert plans a big celebration, inviting friends and workmates to his house. The party is a chance for him to boost his ego with the presence of both people from his country and white people from Britain, who would see Kehinde change clothes ten times "as rich men's wives did in Nigeria" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 37). At the party, Kehinde still acts and behaves according to what is expected from a married Nigerian woman, following the established gendered pattern constructed in that patriarchal society. Although she is still unsure about the prospect of returning and argues that they both might not make it in Nigeria as they did in London, Albert has already decided he will go first. Kehinde is then expected to stay in London and keep her job until the house is sold. At this point, Kehinde is still very attached to traditional notions about gender, so she accepts her

husband's early departure, hopeful that soon they will be together again. Her strong belief in the institution of marriage becomes apparent in another situation at the party. She expresses her bewilderment when talking to one of the guests, Mary Elikwu, a woman who has left an abusive husband and taken their six kids with her. Kehinde reacts with contempt and cannot hide how the woman's behaviour is shocking and unacceptable to her standards. Mary Elikwu attends the university, dresses simply and chooses not to use her husband's name professionally. Her audacity intrigues and disturbs Kehinde, who finds it difficult to accept Mary's decision: "What is the matter with this woman? Kehinde wondered. Not wanting to be called 'Mrs' when every Nigerian woman is dying for the title. [...] This woman must be crazy" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 39). As Kehinde still sees the roles of wife and mother as defining elements and sources of pride for a woman, Mary Eliku's rupture of the expected traditional female role provokes Kehinde's disdain towards "a woman who refused to work at her marriage" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 39).

Kehinde's attitude reveals her insistence on preserving her deeply rooted convictions regarding gender identities. Culturally, she was taught that a married woman is expected to make all efforts to preserve her marriage under any circumstances. Otherwise, she is breaking the 'natural flow' of life. At this point in her journey, Kehinde places greater value on being a married woman than on being free and independent. After the party, although she is tired from "wearing a social mask", Kehinde cannot hide her anxiety about the next steps. By resorting to the memories of the couple's early days together, she remembers their first years of migration, the progress made in their jobs and how their plans to go back appeared to be only tentative: "They assumed they would return eventually and build their own house in Ibusa, their home village" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 41).

As planned, Albert departs for Nigeria and Kehinde remains in London with the kids to sell the house. After a while, Joshua and Bimpe join their father, and Kehinde remains. After two years, with the house still unsold, Kehinde feels insecure and lonely. Albert's letters do not say enough and she suspects there is something going on. Once more, Kehinde hears the strong voice of Taiwo within her, as if reflecting on her feeling of isolation, "of being marginal to everyone else's lives" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 46). The images of the dream about her father flood back and the fear of being betrayed overwhelms her. Kehinde is also shunned by other Nigerians who do not show up to celebrate her birthday even after "the lavish farewell party they had thrown for Albert's departure" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 59), leaving her to think she is 'a half-person' without Albert. Her sadness is deepened when she loses touch with Moriammo, who is busy with a newborn and forbidden by her husband to see

Kehinde on the grounds that she is a disobedient wife. In disbelief, Kehinde reflects on her actions, pondering: "She had not committed a crime, so why was she being cast as the guilty party? She had not deserted her husband, he had just gone home ahead of her, to start building their new life in Nigeria" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 61). Despite Albert's saying she just has to learn how to manage better and the awareness that she would lose her financial independence, Kehinde decides to go back to Nigeria and join her husband and children.

Her sudden decision to resign and leave London surprises her colleagues, who value Kehinde's competence at her job and never thought she was unhappy there. One of her women workmates points out that their position was envied by men "who can't wait to step into our shoes, with all the unemployment" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 62). Her boss Arthur jokes around the idea that Kehinde is going back to have another baby. Despite these remarks, Kehinde shows confidence in her decision, saying she never intended to settle in England for life. But the news of her resignation is treated with anger by Albert, who accuses her of being unreasonable.

Similar to what happens to Hortense in *Small Island* when she arrives in London with her hopes up to find a welcoming environment, Kehinde's homecoming is equally disappointing. However, Kehinde does not face the experience of alienation in a new land. Instead, her disillusionment happens where she was born, her country of birth, and the land of her ancestors. Upon her arrival in Lagos, her feeling of estrangement is immediate. Kehinde is startled by the noise and chaos of the city, with a number of buses packed to capacity and people and the sound of car horns. Besides, the news that Albert's sisters live in her new 'new' house takes her aback, hinting at a different welcome moment after two long years away from her family: "Kehinde had harboured the dream of their being alone together for a few days, now that the children were at school. She knew now that she had to nerve herself for a different scenario. Staying in the same house with Albert's sisters was more than she had bargained for" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 68). Kehinde is received by her sister Ifeyinwa that nervously discloses the news that Albert has married another woman, who is expecting their second child. Albert's second wife, Rike, is beautiful, young, and a professor at a university, however, she still acts according to the Igbo tradition, accepting Albert's polygamous behaviour. All of Kehinde's expectations are shattered, and the link to her home cultural practices and beliefs is broken.

In *Negotiating Power and Privilege: Igbo Career Women in Contemporary Nigeria* (2004), Philomina Okeke-Ihejirika highlights how polygamy and the centrality of marriage are indigenous practices that help to legitimize patriarchal conventions and affect Ibo

women's career pursuits. Through a series of interviews with educated women of differing ages and professions, the author shows that despite their university education, the Igbo women in southeastern Nigeria encounter challenges that prevent them from fulfilling their professional and personal aspirations. In a review of the aforementioned book, scholar Gloria Chuku explains:

> Western education created opportunities for Igbo housewives to become career women. However, the dysfunctional nature of the education offered to them, the social perceptions and expectations of appropriate jobs, and their roles as wives and mothers have placed Igbo career women in a disadvantaged position while privileging their male counterparts. For these reasons, the author argues that gender, more than class, has remained a major force in determining women's access to formal education and paid employment (CHUKU, 2006, p. 573).

In *Kehinde*, although Rike is an academic professor, her role as a wife and mother is still considered, especially by Albert's family ties, as a defining aspect of her identity. She accepts the practice of polygamy without questioning; Kehinde's presence in the same house does not seem to be an issue for her. Rike maintains the status quo offering no resistance to the patriarchal structure she is inserted in. The narrator explains: "Rike was a typical Lagos girlfriend, who did not ask any questions. She was happy to have a man approved by her church, and not just an ordinary man, but a polished one" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 117). But later her territory is also challenged when she is told by Ifeyinma that Albert is planning to have a third wife.

On her first night in Lagos, Kehinde perceives that her 'home' has become a foreign and hostile place. The memory from another dislocation and consequent estrangement is then evoked: "That first night reminded her of her first visit to Ibusa, long, long, long ago, when she was a child. She felt as lost now as she had felt then. Even the way people talked had changed, showing a whole range of jokes and expressions which meant nothing whatever to her" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 74-75). In addition, Kehinde's journey back to Nigeria involves a reencounter with some elements of the patriarchal structure that have become 'alien' to her. After many years of living abroad, she is unfamiliar with the customs that favour the man but downgrade her status as a woman. Also, due to changes happening in Nigerian society, Kehinde does not receive any of the rewards given to a senior wife. She is forced to live in a more constricted space than the one she had in London, being assigned to a small room with a single bed, instead of the double bed she had sent to Nigeria. There, she feels confined and isolated. Although Kehinde immediately recognizes her inferior status within the Nigerian household, she refuses to conform to the new setting, questioning her husband's selfish act

and the complicity of the other women in the house. Albert's sisters relegate Kehinde to a position of subservience that is justified as a sign of respect for Albert: "Here women were supposed to stick together and a wife to give her husband enough room to be a man" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 89).

Kehinde is consumed by feelings of hopelessness and anger, as a result of Albert's deception. While living in diaspora, Albert had "played to perfection the role of the Igbo family man in London" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 35), yet returning to his homeland, he sheds his mask, taking up the superior and oppressive position of a real Igbo man. He does not care about how his polygamous behaviour will be received by Kehinde and expects her to accept his second marriage as a continuation of his parents' tradition: "I know you're angry. But look back, Kehinde. My father had two wives, yours had three, so what sin did I commit that is so abominable?" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 86). This passage shows how Albert is closely connected to the traditions that grant him the authority to justify his behaviour. Despite the different dynamics of their relationship in London, he fails to embrace the beliefs that would require him to treat Kehinde as his equal. Once again, he does not take Kehinde's feelings into consideration, acting selfishly and cowardly, behaving very differently from the way she remembers him to be.

Kehinde's view of their marriage is not shared by Albert, who is solely interested in keeping his authority intact and avoiding any chance of feeling inferior to his wife again. Having hidden his dissatisfaction with their setup in London for many years, he now relies on the strength of tradition to secure his newly acquired status, never disclosing to Kehinde that his ego had been wounded for a long time. In the chapter entitled 'Origins', the story switches to the first-person narration one more time. Kehinde's discloses Albert's mindset when they first met: "Albert's attitude was that polygamy was degrading for women, which he based on his own experience with his father's two wives. I therefore thought we were on the same mind on the matter" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 84). Nevertheless, by breaking his commitment to Kehinde after being married to her for so long, he leads her to rethink the value of their relationship and also of the institution of marriage. Kehinde is treated as an inferior by her husband's family who expects her to fulfil the role of "the senior wife of a successful Nigerian man" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 73). Albert's sisters do not regard her as highly as Rike, and are constantly reminding her of the importance of community values. She is also expected to treat her husband with a degree of formality she never used in London, which entails not calling him by his name in front of other people. Besides losing the primary status of Albert's only wife, Kehinde has to report to his older sisters as part of the established

cultural conventions. When she sits next to Albert in the car as she used to do, she is told off by Albert's older sister: "So, who do you think you are? Don't you see your mate, Rike? Don't you see her sitting at the back with her maid and baby. When we, the relatives of the head of the family are here, we take the place of honour by our Albert. [...] So, go to the back and let us move on" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 88). The sisters' attitude show how women can also be bearers of patriarchy, helping to perpetuate the tradition of female subordination to men in public and domestic spaces.

Having restored her friendship with Moriammo, Kehinde is able to vent her frustrations and perplexity in a letter: "Yes Moriammo, he has another wife. She is a lecturer. She has a PhD. She has a maid. She has a Peugeot. She has a son twelve months old. And I am sure the one she is carrying will be another son" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 94). The exchange of letters between Kehinde and Moriammo proves to be more than a way of asserting the friendship between the two women. The epistolary device serves as a narrative strategy to expose the painful reality of Kehinde's role in Lagos, where her position as a dependent senior wife involves frequent humiliation and isolation. Moreover, other factors contribute to Kehinde's feeling that she lacks a sense of purpose in the Nigerian setting; she cannot get a job because she has no degree, and her kids do not need her constant care as they are happy in boarding school. Either because of her age or lack of academic qualification, Kehinde finds herself leading an unbearable life. This lack of autonomy causes her to depend on Albert's money, which proves to be the worst aspect of her experience: "Albert has humiliated me [...] He gave me the first housekeeping money in over eighteen years of marriage, and I had to take it" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 94). Kehinde acknowledges that Nigeria is 'a man's world', where women are supposed to play the submissive roles of wife and mother, which in her view turn out to be degrading and limiting roles. As Lauretta Ngcobo argues:

> Buchi Emecheta knows the hidden feelings of African women and she voices them as perhaps no one has done before. Where the African woman has made a virtue of silent suffering, Emecheta exposes the conspiracy, insisting that female complacency and the unquestioning acceptance of male domination do not constitute the quintessence of femininity (NGCOBO, 1987, p. 8).

Emecheta's outspoken writing also portrays the pain and frustration endured by African women who seek love, respect, and commitment in their marital relationships. Kehinde's disappointment with Albert's selfish and distant behaviour in Nigeria, her refusal

to accept a life without financial independence, and above all, her shock at the submissive gender roles played naturally in the Nigerian family, make her decide to return to London.

Initially, Kehinde's sister Ifeyinwa, who is extremely poor, has many kids and an abusive and polygamous husband, shows her disapproval at Kehinde's decision to leave Lagos, saying she would taint the family's reputation, showing yet one more time how patriarchal values are internalized by those who are oppressed by patriarchy. However, right before Kehinde leaves, Ifeyinwa confesses her desire to go along, justifying her previous reaction as part of her sisterly duty to reaffirm the importance of keeping their traditions. But Kehinde is not interested in performing the expected role of mother and wife according to the Igbo tradition anymore and consequently sacrifices her marriage. "The circle had closed in her absence, and she did not have the strength to fight her way back in" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 91). Her previous idea that she was a "half-person" without Albert is left behind as he fails to be the same partner she once had and confided in. She chooses to leave without following anyone's guidance. Such attitude can be related to what Susan Friedman explains in "Bodies on the Move: A Poetics of Home and Diaspora" (2004): "A poetics of dislocation may begin for some in recognizing "home" as no place they want to be, as a place where the heart may be, but a place that must be left, as a place whose leaving is the source of speech and writing" (FRIEDMAN, 2004, p. 205).

In *Kehinde*, the realization that marriage and motherhood are not the only sources of fulfilment in a woman's life makes Kehinde reconsider her previous opinion of Mary Elikwu, whom she previously labelled and criticized for having decided to leave her husband. Surprisingly, Kehinde finds herself in a similar situation. After all the humiliation suffered at the hands of her own husband and his sisters, she begins to see Mary differently, as an example of autonomy and inspiration, a woman who dared to break the standards of conduct expected by her own culture in spite of other people's criticism. She shares this view with Moriammo: "She has foresight, going to college and having herself educated, after so many children. Raising children is no longer enough. The saving grace for us women is the big 'E' of education." (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 95).

Rike's choice, however, is questioned: "This girl, Rike, doesn't even have to live with us because her education has made her independent, yet she is content to be an African wife in an Igbo culture. How come we in England did not see all this?" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 95). Although Rike is financially independent and highly educated, she chooses to marry Albert and accept his polygamous behaviour, attributing to the institution of marriage a value much greater than her own academic and professional achievements. In this context,

Emecheta alters the constructed gender role ascribed to women by showing Kehinde's determination to sacrifice her marriage in order to free herself from an oppressive system and to choose what should be rejected or embraced in her process of self-discovery.

Kehinde's feeling of dislocation is so intense that she starts comparing Lagos and London in an effort to understand where she really belongs to. From this moment on, the idea of homecoming radically changes for her. Her return is not based on false hopes but on a well-known reality that she misses. Even those elements that used to annoy her, like shopping for Christmas or the damp cold autumn weather, suddenly become appealing. As the narrator remarks: "She felt nostalgia for the wet stinking body-smell of the underground" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 96). On this note, Bromberg observes:

> Kehinde's central struggle may be seen as both psychological and political—whether to adhere to Igbo cultural norms and beliefs or to break free from that cultural identity to forge a new self in the multicultural world of London. The novel emphasizes the emotional pressure of navigating these competing identities with episodes of fragmentation and depression (BROMBERG, 2020, p. 186).

Through a genuine act of sisterhood, Moriammo helps Kehinde break away from her new home's limiting patriarchal environment. She sends money for Kehinde's ticket to London and writes: "Don't let the fear of what people will say stop you from doing what your *chi* wants" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 100). Moriammo's advice embraces their culture's spiritual realm, signalling the possibility to keep faith in the tradition even away from their homeland. *Kehinde* then informs her kids that she is returning to London for 'her own sanity', promising to bring them over as soon as possible. The positive force of female solidarity and sisterhood is present in *Kehinde* as it also happens in the relationship between Hortense and Queenie in *Small Island*.

In her essay, Marie Umeh points out that because Emecheta experienced a sense of displacement in both African and European settings, her narratives encompass the stories and issues of women belonging to different social classes and with dissimilar backgrounds. Defending "resistance against sexism and racism, Emecheta constructs a liberating model for female solidarity and cultural transformations across differences in her multivoiced characters" (UMEH, 1996, p. xxxi). Besides Moriammo's friendship, the protagonist has the constant support and guidance of her living and dead sisters, Ifeyinma and Taiwo, respectively. These secondary female characters, including Mary Elikwu, and their experiences, also contribute to Kehinde's changing perception of her cultural roots and her repositioning in the diasporic space.

Back in Nigeria, Kehinde experiences a strong sense of estrangement when dealing with aspects of her own culture along with the extreme frustration and disappointment with her husband's behaviour. Confined to the domestic space in a house which she does not feel entitled to call her own, Kehinde experiences the bitter reality of dislocation. Apart from the support from her sister, Kehinde feels lonely, isolated and completely alienated in her homeland, unable to accept and adapt to its existing patriarchal practices and unwilling to be financially dependent on her husband. Velma Mohan observes:

> Her stay in her native land creates an awareness of the freedom she enjoys in the West and the sexual oppression she undergoes in Nigeria. Like all modern Nigerian women, she is caught in a conundrum between African traditions and westernization. She sways like a pendulum fluctuating between two poles of culture (MOHAN, 2017, p. 87).

Differently from what happens to Hortense and Nazneen, the other protagonists of the novels analysed in this dissertation, Kehinde goes through the experience of returning to her homeland and then lives a second diasporic movement to the same destination, about two decades after her first migration. While her decision to return to Nigeria was based on her conviction that she needed to save her marriage and be with her kids, Kehinde's decision to go to London is driven solely by her personal needs, unrelated to the impositions of her role as a wife and or a mother. Prior to her return to Nigeria, she was left alone without her family and was the last to make the move. Her return to London, though, entails leaving them behind and facing life by herself. Upon her arrival, Kehinde feels welcome and connected to the diasporic space. Both the weather and nature signal hope:

> Outside, though it was cold, the sun was shining, and she felt a surge of elation. She got out of the taxi in front of the house in Leyton, and was surprised that nothing had changed in the twelve months she had been away. She did not know what changes she had been expecting but it looked as if things had stood still. Only a few hours before, still in Nigeria, she had thought the whole world was collapsing. Now she noticed the trees the council had planted along the street were just beginning to bud. In a few days, they would burst into bloom, and it would be spring (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 107).

As soon as Kehinde gets to her house, she hears again the voice of her sister Taiwo: "Home, sweet home [...] We make our choices as we go along, came the voice. This is yours. There's nothing to be ashamed of in that" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 108). Her sister's voice here can be interpreted as Kehinde's inner voice, a part of her subjectivity that says to herself that "This house is not for sale. This house is mine" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 108). At this

stage in life, Kehinde is ready to acknowledge the complexity of the meaning of home in her trajectory as her house symbolizes a space that is more personal than geographical, representing her choice to make London her true home in the diaspora. As Luna Prona writes:

> Emecheta's fiction, like many other post-colonial texts, is deeply rooted in the contrasting senses of place and displacement. Several of her characters are concerned with the development or recovery of an effective relationship between their selves and the place where they live or where they were born (ABOUT..., [202-]).

Despite her determination, Kehinde's resettlement in England proves to be extremely challenging. Following the timeline, she probably returns between the late 70s and early 80s, when the country has gone through drastic political and economic changes. This time was also marked by Margaret Thatcher's first term as British prime minister. During her tenure, Thatcher implemented a series of controversial measures that left a profound impact on Britain's economic and social situation, leading to a surge in unemployment rates and widespread social unrest.

In *Kehinde*, such economic and social transformation directly affects the protagonist's professional life. Unable to regain her previous position at the bank, Kehinde is forced to accept a job as a hotel cleaner, but she does not lose hope of succeeding; she also starts attending university. With her house still unsold, she calls it 'home' the physical space that brings comfort, security, familiarity, and a sense of belonging. The concept of 'homing desire' coined by Avtar Brah (1996) can be articulated here. The desire to reinvent and rewrite a home in the hostland motivates Kehinde to reclaim her belonging in that society again. But times are different in London and Kehinde feels on a daily basis the heavy weight of her past decision to leave for Nigeria. Duro, her co-worker at the hotel, comments:

> You got that job a long time ago, and you were stupid to leave. You can't get such jobs now. You never know, with your degree you may even be regarded as being over-qualified. An educated black person in a responsible job is too much of a threat. White people don't feel comfortable in their presence (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 125).

Kehinde also suffers racial and gender discrimination and is exposed to very challenging situations. When a wealthy Arab sheik staying at the hotel hires her to teach English to one of his wives and orders Kehinde to undress in front of him, because he wants to see what a naked Black woman looks like, she is strong enough to dismiss his sexual attempts and gives up her job. Through the gaze of the sheik, Kehinde's body becomes a

spectacle, an object of perverse admiration, a commodity that lacks content or autonomy. She is reduced to a passive position and, as a spectator, the man sees Kehinde as a thing to be looked at. This stereotyped and objectified view of the black subject is extensively discussed in the works of anti-colonial thinker and psychiatrist Franz Fanon, particularly in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Fanon argues that the structure of colonialism objectifies and dehumanizes black bodies, denying them agency, subjectivity and integrity. This objectification leads to the internalization of racial stereotypes with deep consequences on the psyche of black individuals, who might experience feelings of inferiority and self-hatred. Although Fanon roots much of his argument in the experience of the black man, I find it pertinent to refer to his work as he stresses the need to understand the origins of racial oppression in the process of resistance and liberation. In *Kehinde*, Emecheta shows how the protagonist's body is subjected to the white/other gaze, reproducing old colonial power relations. However, the protagonist shows agency and rebels against this imposition. Kehinde does not accept this subjugation and leaves the job despite the need for income and financial stability. After a while, Kehinde finds a part-time position that aligns with her university degree in Sociology which "made her feel she was entitled to hold her head up, despite being a cleaner" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 128).

Education proves to be the crucial liberating force for Kehinde. Through the stories of Mary Elikwu and Kehinde, Emecheta articulates the significance of education as a key tool to give women the power to find freedom from patriarchal constraints. Kehinde's achievement is celebrated in a letter by Bimpe: "I know you said you were determined to be a university graduate, but honestly mum, I didn't think you could achieve it. Many congratulations" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 122). In the same letter, we are informed that Albert has lost his job and the family's financial situation is unstable. Bimpe complains about her routine in Nigeria, exposing the effort to integrate into a different routine: "When I return from school, the amount of housework I am expected to do, Ma, it's incredible. My friends say I feel this way because I was born in England and can easily go back to London" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 120). Because she is a girl, Bimpe is supposed to look after the house and is not even sure she can continue with her studies. Following patriarchal practices, boys are sent to a boarding school, while girls are expected to look after the family. Apart from facing gender discrimination, in Nigerian societies girls are subjected to punishment for small mistakes while boys' faults are overlooked. In *Kehinde*, Joshua's impoliteness, for example, is seen as typical behaviour of a self-assured teenage boy. Bimpe, on the other hand, is not allowed to take part in family discussions and is promptly silenced by her father. In Igbo society a

woman is subjected to male dominance and confined to domestic spaces. While a woman who complies with her submissive status is tolerated (Rike), one who decides to fight against it is condemned and ostracized (Mary Eliku).

Albert's instructions to Joshua before his son returns to London provides another example of a patriarchal attitude connected to the notion of gender identity: "We must stick together, and look after our women. The house in London is yours. Make sure it goes under your name. Your mother loves you very much and will be happy to see you make your claim" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 140). But Joshua finds a mother who is more confident and self-fulfilled. When he questions the presence of Michael Gibson and protests: "But this is my house, and I want him out" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 137), Kehinde immediately corrects him "It's not quite like that. This is *my* house, though it may be yours one day" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 137). The weight of patriarchy in Africa 'where young men were made to feel they owned heaven and earth', is immediately dismissed by Kehinde. When her choice to have an intimate relationship with her tenant is questioned, she satirically responds to Joshua saying she is behaving just like his dad in Nigeria: "That's one of the beauties of polygamy, it gives you freedom" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 138). Joshua, who expected to return to the 'ideal Ibusa village mother', is shocked at Kehinde's self-assertion and prompt warning that in her home in London, she is the one making decisions.

The notion of home as developed by Rosemary George in *The Politics of Home* can also be articulated here. George argues that home is more than a physical place but also a site of power dynamics and social relations. It is associated with all people, situations, smells, sounds and emotions that make us feel 'belonging' or not to a specific place (GEORGE, 1996, p. 9). All these elements are incorporated into Kehinde's sense of identity and belonging after her so many years of living in London. For this reason, the return to Nigeria and to a series of cultural practices dictated by a strictly patriarchal society causes immediate estrangement and the idea of remaining there becomes an impossibility. As seen in the analysis of *Small Island*, the concept of home is deeply intertwined with issues related to identity, belonging and exclusion. Kehinde manages to rebuild her notion of home because of the nature of her experiences. As her experience back in Nigeria proves to be a disaster in many ways, the idea of a safe home in her place of birth is no longer feasible. She then realizes that her homeland is not the place where she belongs anymore. Despite the initial setbacks, Kehinde gradually finds her place in the diasporic setting and establishes herself in that society one more time. In London, she runs a house, pursues an education, starts a new career, embarks on a romantic relationship with her tenant and continues to be a caring

mother, sending money to her kids in Lagos until they are ready to return. In "The London Novels of Buchi Emecheta" Christine W. Sizemore argues:

> Kehinde has found in London a place from which to speak, and she can join her Caribbean lover, in what Paul Gilroy calls the culture of the "Black Atlantic", a culture of the African diaspora that creates a space for black men and women not just in Africa, or even America, but all around the Atlantic (SIZEMORE, 1996, p. 382).

Paul Gilroy's concept of Black Atlantic explores the interconnectedness of the African diaspora and the cultural and historical exchanges that have occurred among black communities across the Atlantic during their forced dislocation because of the slave trade. Gilroy's argument challenges the notion of fixed national identities, highlighting the hybridity of diasporic black individuals. Thus, it can be affirmed that from her position as a Black-African woman in exile living in the postcolonial setting of London, Emecheta articulates her own diasporic identity features in her texts. This intertwinement was explained by Emecheta:

> I think I've become more international, because for the last ten years or more, I've spent about two or three months every year in America for example. And then in Nigeria. And of course I have travelled to a lot of places, Germany, Holland, France and elsewhere in Europe. You can't have all these experiences without changing. They make you what you are. (JUSAWALLA; DASENBROCK, 1992, p. 97).

In *Kehinde*, we follow the protagonist's trajectory as she navigates these interconnections. What's more, the relationship with Michael Gibson provokes in Kehinde a romantic and sexual awakening that for long had been absent in her relationship with Albert for a long time. It empowers her to see and accept her identity as a woman, removing the label of wife or mother. The decision to accept "Taiwo's voice as a permanent part of her consciousness" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 135) enables Kehinde to transcend the duality that once seemed imprisoning to her. The realization that the adoption of certain Western values does not prevent her from keeping some Igbo traditions alive is emancipatory and liberating for the protagonist. In addition, the city where Kehinde had lived for so many years also acquires a different aspect from the moment she is open to changing her habits and exploring London to "go out to eat Indian or Chinese with a man who was not her husband or even Nigerian" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 135). In "Embodying Emotion Sensing Space: Introducing Emotional Geographies", Davidson and Milligan remark that emotions "might be seen as a form of connective tissue that links experiential geographies of the human psyche and physique with(in) broader social geographies of place" (DAVIDSON; MILLLIGAN, 2015, p.

524). Kehinde's act of transgression, as she is still a married woman, marks her transition into a new vision of herself and of London:

> Apart from takeaway fish and chips and the Wimpy lunches of her bank day, she had not explored this aspect of London life at all. She had seen many dressed-up people going to eat in the hotel dining room where she worked, but for some reason she had thought that sort of thing was for other people. She was learning. (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 136).

She also challenges the sexist attitudes of her son, who is influenced by his father and the patriarchal structure in Nigeria, transgressing the limits that had been imposed on her by gendered and cultural practices. On this note, I quote Ijedike Jeboma in *Kehinde: Mother, Woman*:

> The 'natural' role of women as nurturers and protectors of the family unit comes into conflict with the individual freedom of liberated women. Emecheta does not pick one or the other. Instead, her work highlights the failings of both models; how they restrict women's choices and passions; the singularities within which the models operate. *Kehinde* ends on a complex middle ground, where the titular character admits the impact living for others had on her life, rejects rigid gendered roles within the society, and pursues individual happiness while still maintaining a community of her own. (JEBOMA, 2021).

Despite making the decision to return to London without her children until they are ready to come back, Kehinde never ceases to be a caring and nurturing mother. Bimpe's letter reveals her happiness in seeing her mother with a university degree and her gratitude for the money she sends. There is care, respect, and admiration in their relationship. With Joshua, however, Kehinde is tougher because of his attitude, which is influenced by his father's ideas. When she says no to Joshua, she hasn't stopped loving him; she is simply not abiding by the Nigerian code of behaviour that prescribes different roles for men and women. This difference in perspective shows how Kehinde's empowerment does not diminish the value of motherhood for her, but rather repositions it in her new self-perception.

Another crucial element in the novel is Kehinde's loss of her mother figure. The relationship with her aunt Nnebogo, who was not even her real mother, can be read as a point of departure for the protagonist's questioning of her own identity and where home is. Elaine Savory Fido articulates this idea in the article "Mother/lands: Self and Separation in the Work of Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head and Jean Rhys" (1992) when she argues how the figure of the mother (land) is the starting point of all journeys and the point of reference for all destinations, even when the mother-daughter relationship is non-existent. Although *Kehinde* is not the novel by Emecheta that Fido discusses, the argument she uses provides support to my short analysis of the impact Kehinde's (non) relationship with her mother has on her

notion of self and belonging. Fido observes that: "In a sense, we know that there is no homecoming unless the mother is at the end of it. It is through our relations with our mothers that we, daughters, discover who we are and, moreover, whether or not who we are is acceptable" (FIDO, 1992, p. 330). Fido also points out how the lack of motherly nurturing might result in a woman rejecting or doubting herself and, eventually searching for a substitute, which can be another person or even another land, "a place where we might hope to lose the sense of pain and inadequacy" (FIDO, 1992, p. 331). Following this conception, Kehinde's eventual choice to return to London and proudly acknowledge that's her home happens together with the coming to terms with the figure of her twin as the closest connection to her mother.

Kehinde's redefinition of her identity in London includes liberating herself from the idea that her historical and cultural background will define her forever. In response to her son's accusations that she was supposed to live for her kids, Kehinde replies: "Mothers are people too, you know [...] I'm enjoying meeting new people and leading my own life. [...] I just don't have the energy to be the carrier of everybody's burdens anymore" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 139). In this passage, Emecheta erases the image of motherhood and marriage being as restricting forces in a woman's life. Kehinde is perfectly aware of her authority to set the rules in 'her' house, whether her son likes it or not.

Kehinde's trajectory to selfhood involves going from a stable life and an apparent harmonious marital relationship during her first stay in England to a position of powerlessness and submissiveness upon her return to Nigeria to join her husband and children to one of self-awareness and personal growth once she decides to go back to England on her own. Despite many obstacles, Kehinde is capable of taking the necessary steps to escape from patriarchal oppression and exert her individuality. Kehinde proves to be the rebel which gives the title to the last chapter. It is to her sister Taiwo that she talks to, in the end, revealing a moment of complicity and belonging: "'Claiming my right does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything it makes me more human' she murmured to her Taiwo" (EMECHETA, 1994, p. 141). According to Brenda F. Berrian, in "Her Ancestor's Voice: The Ibéji Transcendence of Duality in Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde*" (1996),

> by recalling and inserting the present day reverence for twins, Emecheta uses her skills to create a protagonist who possesses the courage to confront her goals without compromise. Neither defeated by indigenous Igbo gender definitions nor constrained by Western gender definitions, Kehinde conjures up her own self-definition with the aid of her spiritual twin Taiwo and embraces only those values which are the most beneficial for her lifestyle (BERRIAN, 1996, p. 171).

Kehinde's diasporic experience and the changed perspective about her country of birth and about herself contribute to her developing an identity that is not fixed, but fluid and dynamic. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), Stuart Hall defines the diaspora experience as "the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of "identity" which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" (HALL, 1990, p. 235). All dislocations lived by the protagonist contribute to her path towards belonging and the awareness of her hybrid identity. Professor Sandra Lilyana explains in "The Disruption of Home and Identity in Black Identity in Black British Writing" (2007):

> All of her actions are symbolic of the birth of her new identity, which is fluid, transnational and transcultural. She is no longer bound by her Nigerian identity yet she realizes she will never be a genuine British either. Her notion of 'homeland' is now neither Nigeria nor Britain and as a result, she will always be 'perpetually wandering' in between. (LILYANA, 2007, p. 118).

In the previously mentioned interview with Ogundele, Emecheta says that the story of Kehinde shows the spirit of Black women towards survival: "They survive despite all odds. Most of these women have a western education but their colour hinders their opportunities and advancement in society" (OGUNDELE, 1996, p. 455). Without a doubt, Kehinde's trajectory might be representative of the strength and determination of real-life black women who manage to cope with racial discrimination as well as the cultural and social changes that are part of the diaspora experience. All in all, Kehinde's journey towards acknowledging that she is the owner of the house in England and that she is entitled to claim her right to make her own choices in life is also a journey towards self-acceptance and emancipation. From the moment she returns to Nigeria, Kehinde finds herself relegated to the margins, and unable to fit in that society. However, her numerous dislocations since birth eventually lead her to live in the centre of the space she chooses to belong to, aware of its constraints and opportunities. Her decisions to get a university degree, reaffirm her sexuality and claim the house in London lead Kehinde to transgress the limitations of the wife and mother roles that have been assigned to her. She does not see herself as a victim but rather as a rebel, a warrior that feels empowered to build a new life away from the oppressive elements that were once so dominating. Only when Kehinde is able to secure a place of her own (physically and metaphorically) does she feel free and fulfilled. By stating to herself that she and her Taiwo are one, Kehinde redefines her subjectivity and takes ownership of her in-betweenness. Quoting Professor Romanus Muoneke on this denouement:

> This permanent merger with Taiwo is indicative of her complete reintegration of the self. Rehabilitation of the self or the redefinition of one's identity is the beginning of real and meaningful existence. In *Kehinde*, such rehabilitation is achieved in London far away from the protagonist's country of origin. Emecheta stylistically uses space and movement to resolve the conflict introduced at the opening of the novel (MUONEKE, 2006, p. 71).

Emecheta skilfully creates a protagonist who does not give up on her Igbo origins or assimilate western values completely but rather adopts the elements that are aligned with her vision of the world and of herself. In the end, Kehinde recognizes her power within the space she chooses to belong, achieving freedom through self-awareness.

# 4 **DWELLING IN DISPLACEMENT IN *BRICK LANE*, BY MONICA ALI**

> Without doubt, our emotions matter. They have tangible effects on our surroundings and can shape the very nature and experience of our being-in-the-world. Emotions can clearly alter the way the world is for us, affecting our sense of time as well as space. Our sense of who and what we are is continually (re)shaped by how we feel.
>
> *Joyce Davidson e Christine Milligan*

> Reading fiction can help the development of empathy.
>
> *Monica Ali*

*Brick Lane,* by Monica Ali (1967), received widespread critical acclaim upon its publication in 2003 and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and nominated for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. In the same year, the writer was named by Granta magazine as one of the 20 Best of Young British Novelists. Born in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1967 (still East Pakistan at that time), Ali moved to Britain at the age of three, when her family decided to escape the violent conflict caused by the War of Independence in 1971. Ali has written three other novels, but *Brick Lane* propelled her to the top of the literary charts. In *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature – 1945-2010* (2016), Monica Ali appears on the list of British South-Asian second-generation writers whose narratives centre on the physical, cultural, and emotional effects of the diasporic experience, addressing life before migration and the difficulties of settling in a hostile society.

The novel's literary success attracted the attention of the British movie industry but also generated much controversy. Some members of the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets were reportedly discontent when the announcement of the upcoming shooting of the novel-based film in the region of Brick Lane was made in 2007. Those who protested against the book and the film apparently felt offended by the novel's portrayal of Bangladeshi immigrants living in London. When interviewed in the same year, Monica Ali rejected the idea that her writing derived directly from a desire to represent the Bangladeshi community. Dismissing the burden of representation, she said: "I wrote out of character" (INSTITUTE OF

CONTEMPORARY ARTS, 2007). When asked about her source of inspiration, the author cited a number of factors:

> My experience, for instance, of conflict between first and second-generation immigrants. The stories that my father used to tell about village life. A book of case studies about Bangladeshi women garment workers in Dhaka and the East End of London, disparate lives drawn together by the common goal of self-empowerment. [...] How can I write about a community to which I do not truly belong? Perhaps, the answer is I can write about it because I do not truly belong. "Growing up with an English mother and a Bengali father means never being an insider. Standing neither behind a closed door, nor in the thick of things, but rather in the shadow of the doorway, is a good place from which to observe (ALI, 2003b).

*Brick Lane* focuses on the experiences of Nazneen, a young Bangladeshi woman who is forced by her father to leave her village in Bangladesh to marry a much older man in London. The novel explores Nazneen's difficulties in adapting to life in a new country while her sense of identity and purpose is constantly challenged. Through Nazneen's perspective, *Brick Lane* delves into the struggles of cultural displacement, the search for personal fulfilment, the intersections between class and gender and the effects of globalization and capitalism on the lives of South-Asian immigrants in the UK mainly at the turn of the twenty-first century. In her long process of self-empowerment over the years, Nazneen learns to cope with the challenges of living as a Muslim woman in the cosmopolitan setting of London, which has its geographical, cultural and social spaces deeply transformed by the presence of immigrants like her.

In this dissertation, I recognize that *Brick Lane* is, above all, a work of fiction, which provides a series of reflections on issues pertaining to the experience of South-Asian women immigrants, including cultural displacement, gender inequality, economic insecurity, language barriers and ethnic discrimination. Literary representations can be instrumental in the process of questioning preconceived notions about ethnic minorities and their cultural traditions, offering alternative discourses that integrate individual experiences and discard generalizations.

Through literary representation, *Brick Lane* highlights a number of significant issues related to the experience of migration, focusing on the journeys of Nazneen and her struggles to reconcile her traditional upbringing with the challenges of the social and political realities of life in London as an immigrant. As a counterpoint, the character of her younger sister Hasina is portrayed as both a rebellious and risk-taker young woman, whose story runs in parallel to Nazneen's. As both maintain a strong link with each other through exchanging letters, the dual narrative creates a sense of tension and drama as we are drawn into the

unfolding of their stories. These are intertwined with what happens in the lives of different immigrants from Bangladesh living in the community of Tower Hamlets in East London. The narrative spans over thirty years, beginning in the late 60s, moving to the 80s and continuing into the early 2000s. It shows the political and social changes that take place in London during the period, directly affecting the minority community in the East End. At the same time, the political turmoil and social problems in Bangladesh also figure in the narrative. Important events are woven into the story, such as the aftermath of 9/11 and the race riots in Britain in 2001. Ali also portrays the rise of religious radicalism and discrimination against Muslims in Britain and its impact on the Brick Lane area of Tower Hamlets.

As discussed in chapter 2, migration to the UK began on a large scale after World War II, leading to instances of racial violence and discrimination against Blacks and South Asians. By the 1960s, minority groups recognized the importance of promoting their own ethnic identities and came together to reinforce their cultural practices. Most immigrants from Bangladesh concentrated in the area of East London, where they could find cheap accommodation and low-paying jobs at nearby garment factories.

The first chapter of *Brick Lane* starts with Nazneen's birth in 1967 in a small village situated in the Mymensingh District of East Pakistan, prior to its independence and the creation of Bangladesh, which happened in 1971. Before then, East Pakistan was the land for South Asian Muslims formed in 1947 after the Partition that marked the ending of British colonial power over the vast territory known as India. In *A History of Bangladesh* (2009), Willem Van Schendel delves into the significant historical events that led to the formation of Bangladesh, including the Partition, the war with Pakistan, and the subsequent struggle for independence, which culminated in the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation-state. Schendel highlights the fact that during the period of Pakistani rule, East Pakistan was primarily a rural society, with the majority of its population dependent on agriculture. The novel experience of establishing a new nation was marred by numerous problems, including declining rural incomes and a lack of investment in primary and secondary education. In 1961, 82 per cent of the population in East Pakistan was illiterate. On the other hand, good primary and secondary education was available in English, Urdu and Bengali for those who lived in urban areas and could afford expensive schooling (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 157). As new universities were established, a group of young graduates emerged as the new elite of the region. The combination of economic issues, political unrest, and natural disasters in Bangladesh also resulted in the dislocation of those who could leave the country, mainly between the 60s and the 80s.

In London, the street of Brick Lane is undoubtedly defined by a history of migration. In the 17th century, the French Huguenots settled in the region escaping religious persecution, then in the 19th century, many Jewish people from Eastern Europe sought refuge in London. In the early 20th century, the area became home to the Irish who were fleeing the famine. The first Bengalis to migrate and settle in Brick Lane were mainly seafarers from the Sylhet region who worked on British merchant ships. Due to its proximity to the docks and with cheap housing close to the City, Brick Lane became an ideal location for the growth of a migrant community centred on textile factories. As the textile industry declined, it was replaced by the thriving restaurant trade, which grew significantly in the post-war period (BEYOND, 2018). In the 1980s, Brick Lane underwent a significant transformation from a predominantly Jewish neighbourhood to a community comprised of Bengali immigrants. Although Tower Hamlets was known for its poverty, the prevalence of factory work still gave its residents a better chance of prospering in life than they would have in Bangladesh.

Though most part of the novel is set in Brick Lane, its beginning focuses on Nazneen's birth years before. The story of her first early infancy conveys the definite role that fate plays in her life. Nazneen's deterministic view of the world stems from listening to her mom repeatedly telling the story of "How She Was Left to Her Fate". Confident that maybe it was her daughter's "Fate to starve to death" (ALI, 2003a, p. 4), Nazneen's mom refused to take her to a hospital or give her medicine when she was very sick after birth. This act of resignation is justified by the words: "What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was mantra, fettle, and challenge" (ALI, 2003a, p. 6). For this reason, Nazneen does not allow herself to have wishes, believing they will not make any difference in her life. She is convinced that she must accept things the way they are, be it marrying a much older man and leaving behind the life and place she was once happy with. From this perspective, she submits and devotes herself to her husband and daughters, acting according to the code of behaviour expected from her. Her younger sister Hasina, on the other hand, proves to be a rebel, who 'kicks against fate', breaks the rules and runs away with the man she loves. Her resilience and determination serve as a source of hope and inspiration for Nazneen, whose memories of the past provide an escape from her ordinary life. In the same chapter that explains the root cause of Nazneen's strong belief in fate, the narrator refers to a distant future that anticipates her transformation and consequent autonomy:

> So that when, at the age of thirty-four, after she had been given three children and had one taken away, when she had a futile husband and had been fated a young demanding lover, when for the first time she could not wait for the future to be revealed but had to make it for herself, she was as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye. (ALI, 2003a, p. 6).

In spite of the early unveiling that foreshadows Nazneen's future, the narrative follows the long process of adaptation and self-empowerment that she undergoes over the years. After her mother's death, Nazneen is suddenly forced to migrate moving from the control of one man (her father) to another (Chanu) through an arranged marriage. Living in the borough of Tower Hamlets in East London, Nazneen spends most of her time indoors doing household chores and seldom ventures outside, as her husband forbids her to go out or make any friends. In many passages, Ali shows how the cluttered and disorganized apartment emphasizes Nazneen's sense of suffocation and discontent. She also feels disconnected from her surroundings in the community, where she sees "dead grass and broken paving stones" and where flats "had net curtains, and the life behind was all shapes and shadows" (ALI, 2003a, p. 8). Her detailed observation of one of her neighbours, 'the tattoo lady', who spends her days smoking and drinking alone, conveys Nazneen's feelings of loneliness and displacement. Dealing with some aspects of a culture that is very different from hers, Nazneen's first years in London are marked by isolation, silence and estrangement. Her total unfamiliarity with the new environment and the recourse to her past memories make Nazneen turn inward. We have access to her thoughts more than to her utterances in most parts of the narrative. Praying is also a ritual that brings her stability, a sense of identity, support and reassurance:

> And then, because she had let her mind drift and become uncentered again, she began to recite in her head from the Holy Qur'an one of the suras she had learned at school. She did not know what the words meant but the rhythm of them soothed her. Her breath came from down in her stomach. In and out (ALI, 2003a, p. 12).

For Nazneen, reciting the verses from the Qur'an becomes her source of relief and familiarity. In this sense, her religion is the closest association she can make with the existence she left behind.

Nazneen also dives into a world of fantasy when she finds out about the beauty of ice-skating. By watching the performances on TV, she finds a means to escape the monotony of her routine. Ice-skating represents a world far removed from her own, one that is glamorous, exciting, and full of possibilities. Nazneen gets fascinated by the ice skaters as "every move they made was urgent, intense, a declaration" (ALI, 2003a, p. 29). Watching them perform serves as a form of escapism and inspiration: "The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new

Nazneen was filled with white, glory. But when it ended and she switched off the television, the old Nazneen returned" (ALI, 2003a, p. 34-35). This passage hints at Nazneen's subtle awareness of her fragmented identity or of the possibility of a temporary transformation, 'becoming' a new Nazneen, who feels different about herself, even if it's only for a brief period. The clothes, the movements and the bodies of the ice skaters all look alien to Nazneen and are very divergent from what she has known or experienced in life. Yet, the unfamiliarity of ice-skating performances on TV captures her attention for days, taking her mind off the realization that her movements outside the domestic space and the control over her body are constrained. In the figure of the female ice skater, Nazneen sees an expression of assertiveness and mobility that she lacks in her life:

> She stopped dead and flung her arms above her head with a look so triumphant that you knew she had conquered everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her (ALI, 2003a, p. 29-30).

Nazneen's mobility is limited by the gender role assigned to her. Chanu restrains her from going out and justifies his decision with a patriarchal tone: "If you go out, then people will say, 'I saw her walking on the street'. And I will look like a fool [...]. And anyway, if you were in Bangladesh you would not go out" (ALI, 2003a, p. 39). Her roots dictate the subservience of her marriage and the fulfilment of housework and childcare, without her questioning anything. Conformity rules her life although small impulses take over her mind as a secret act of rebellion, which she quickly oppresses. In her dreams, Nazneen experiences nature, colours, affection, and freedom, all elements that are absent from her life in Brick Lane. Her childhood memories take over her in the middle of a daily task, like cooking or cleaning the house, letting her mind go adrift. Besides, there are the letters sent by Hasina, which appear at irregular intervals and lead Nazneen to daydream or dream about Bangladesh too. The feeling of nostalgia is one of the elements of the diaspora that distinguishes Nazneen's experience from those of Hortense and Kehinde. The memories of the homeland together with the alienation and isolation in the host country for so many years contribute to her sentimentality regarding her past in Bangladesh. Thus, Nazneen keeps replaying scenes from her childhood in her mind as a way to cope with the sadness of being away from her sister, in a strange land where she does not feel welcomed or noticed.

In *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain* (1978), Amrit Wilson presents and analyses recorded interviews with Asian women who migrated from different regions in

South Asia to the UK in the 1970s. Although the book might be considered an old source of reference nowadays, it is still a very rich account of the challenges faced by these women in their new place of residence. In many passages, I found clear parallels between their experiences and Nazneen's. With regards to the feeling of isolation, for instance, the author describes the daily life of Rezia Begum, from Bangladesh: "Rezia spends almost all her time in this room. She rarely goes out and has never been beyond the streets she lives in on her own. She speaks no English and knows hardly anyone. In her first year in Britain no one visited her" (WILSON, 1978, p. 16). When asked about her husband's place of work, Rezia doesn't know the answer. Many women, just like the fictional Nazneen, let the vivid memories from the homeland 'come flooding from the past, from the life before the semi-existence' while sitting in their apartments waiting for their husbands or kids. As Wilson explains, the feeling of isolation is much more than staying at home and not speaking the local language: "It is a state of mind, one of shock and withdrawal. Weakened by the separation from their families, suffering often the loss of mother, sisters and close friends, these Asian women find themselves in a strange unknown society" (WILSON, 1978, p. 21). In *Brick Lane*, the narrator emphasizes Nazneen's thoughts on Hasina and the anticipation of her letters as she is the thread that links Nazneen to her past and to Bangladesh.

While Nazneen's everyday life is described with an emphasis on the sameness of her daily routine of regular household chores and prayers, Hasina's letters evoke a life of drama and action, suggesting that she has the autonomy to escape her fate and decide the course of her life. Although it is clear from her letters that Hasina is trapped in a culture of exploitation and violence, Nazneen feels her sister has more freedom back at home, longing to read her stories as a way to escape the dull reality she faces in London. The letters create fantasies of freedom for Nazneen, who uses her imagination to move past the walls and bricks that trap her in Brick Lane. At this point in the narrative, Nazneen still has a romanticized image of her homeland and dreams of going back there one day. However, from where Hasina stands, she sees Nazneen as a lucky woman, who has a smart husband and lives in a safe place in London. In spite of Nazneen's apartment being small, shabby and cluttered, Hasina's perspective of London is idealized and influenced by the painful reality she faces in Dhaka. Only later does Nazneen realize that life for her sister has its own challenges and that Hasina may also feel lonely and invisible: "But how would she go home? That was the point of being lost. She, like Hasina, could not simply go home. They were both lost in cities that would not pause even to shrug" (ALI, 2003a, p. 55). Here Ali shows that both sisters are equally constrained by their situation and by cultural practices that silence and limit women's

movement. Even though Hasina does not experience a physical dislocation, she is also displaced, lacking the protection and security that is associated with the feeling of "being at home".

For Nazneen and Hasina, the act of writing and receiving letters is an important means to maintain their connection with each other, to expose their experiences in different places and to nourish their hopes that they will meet again. In addition, the letters highlight the chasm between the two sisters, caused by both the passing of time and the physical distance as they move towards different paths. They also show Ali's choice to use different language registers in the novel, which is clear in Hasina's text. Although we are aware that Hasina is uneducated and does not have any knowledge of the English language, her letters are written in broken sentences with grammar mistakes. In an interview given in 2021 (BAGHYA, 2021), Monica Ali justified the register was used based on the way she wanted Hasina's character to be experienced by the readers: naive, chaotic and broken. The letters underscore her vulnerability as well as her struggle to assert control over her life. We see Hasina's drifting nature expressed in the lack of clarity and fluidity in her writing, which also indicates her marginalized position. Ali's choice of this literary device works as a means to expose the patterns of inequality and oppression in both cultures rather than being only an authentic transcript of the events. However, the letters are the only vehicle that enables Hasina, even in her limited circumstances, to be the subject of her own story, to write instead of being written in the text. While we know that Nazneen also writes to Hasina, the content of her letters is never shown. The reader is left only with her thoughts on drafting them and her expectation to read Hasina's words: "The last letter she got from Hasina had been nearly six months ago. It was short and it was written in a scrawl, not her usual neat hand. [...] Nazneen had written three more times, but nothing came back" (ALI, 2003a, p. 42). Over the course of the narrative, it becomes clear that Nazneen omits some aspects of her life in London when she writes to her sister. Likewise, while writing her own narrative, Hasina creates the story she wants her sister to know. The letters are more than a strategy that cuts into the linearity of the third-person narrator. They can also constitute the fictionalized stories both women create for each other, and maybe, albeit briefly, for themselves. They write about the lives they project for themselves rather than the lives they actually have.

After the death of Raqib, Nazneen's firstborn son, there is a period of thirteen years covered only by Hasina's letters. We do not hear Nazneen's voice for a while and her story is no longer mediated by a narrator. She is silenced by grief and Hasina's story takes over the narrative, exposing the predicaments faced by poor and uneducated women in Dhaka. Her

journey is marked by discrimination, exploitation and abuse, and similarly to Nazneen, she is unhappy with her life in a big city, thinking often about the village where she grew up: "I wake up time to time and think I back home. But is only smell of goat come bleating outside door. City smell different smell of men and cars. I like to smell the village again" (ALI, 2003a, p. 178). Hasina's experience demonstrates that women who challenge the inflexible cultural norms imposed upon them and dare to pursue their dreams might encounter social disapproval and be penalized for their boldness. On the other hand, Nazneen who initially believes her choices are entirely controlled by fate silently discovers how to claim her autonomy, letting go of the hands of fate.

Flashbacks of the village are recurrent, surfacing in moments when Nazneen's sense of displacement overcomes her because London fails to provide the warmth and security she experienced in her home country. As Yasmin Hussain observes, "When Bangladesh is presented it is done so with space; however, the restrictiveness of England is stressed through the feelings of claustrophobia" (HUSSAIN, 2005, p. 100). The distinction between Nazneen's past rural place of living and her environment in the council estate is meticulously described right at the beginning of the novel. She cannot find any joy in living in a place where the front doors "were all the same" and "the stairs gave off a tang of urine" (ALI, 2003a, p. 48). Nazneen's vision of her ideal home is deeply connected to her memories in the village:

> 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? The bricks will not be moved. (ALI, 2003a, p. 86).

Once again there is both a clear association between nature and freedom and a strong contrast between the minority community and the village. In *Brick Lane*, home is also a dynamic and subjective concept, shaped by the experiences of the characters and the way they feel, belonging or not, to the space they inhabit. For Nazneen, feeling at home in London at this point is a big challenge because she does not see herself as belonging or being welcomed there. Her idea of home encompasses a feeling of belonging that includes the presence of her sister and the physical space of her village. Even in the surroundings of the Bangladeshi community, Nazneen feels trapped and misplaced, unable to socialize in the new environment, observing the neighbours from behind the shutters, intrigued by the white "tattoo lady" who sits and smokes on her balcony, behaving in a way that is very unfamiliar to her. The depiction of Nazneen's brief outings around the estate conveys her lack of interest in

mingling and trying to be part of that community, although some residents come from the same country as she does and might even share similar cultural practices. But she does not identify herself with them or their attitudes. This microcosm of her homeland is not enough to make her feel at home. As Hussain also points out,

> Whilst Bangladeshi culture is re-synthesized within Britain, the lifestyles and consumption styles of the diaspora do not reproduce its strength and support for Nazneen. Instead, loneliness and exclusion become defining features of the diasporic experience for her (HUSSAIN, 2005, p. 100).

This happens because Nazneen's nostalgia for the lost home is directly connected to her sense of self. Home is more than a geographical space for her; it is present in her memory and in her emotional realm.

*Brick Lane* shows that despite the pivotal role played by minority communities in big cities when it comes to strengthening their members' sense of identity and connection with their cultural and historical background, it is not appropriate to assert that all immigrants instantly feel belonging to the community. The feeling of displacement experienced by Nazneen is marked by the singularity of her experience of dislocation, which goes against her expectations and desires. Despite its Bangladeshi environment, the borough of Tower Hamlets is part of London and affected by what happens in the city; and the city as a whole remains alien to Nazneen for many years. The novel also sheds light on the injustices and challenges faced by the Bangladeshi community in Britain. Since their establishment, minority communities have had a beneficial impact on the integration of immigrants into British society; however, data shows they have also contributed to their isolation and confinement. In the novel, these areas are still directly affected by inequalities in housing and job opportunities, which causes poverty and high crime rates. According to Willian Shankley and Nissa Finney in "Ethnic minorities and housing in Britain" (2020), at least 1 in 3 households of some ethnic groups (Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Black African) live in overcrowded conditions compared to 1 in 20 white households. This inequality stems from the particular settlement of immigrants in locations afforded to them. Practices of discrimination and racism exist in specific housing systems and tenures, restricting the access of minority groups from entry into specific areas (SHANKLEY; FINNEY, 2020, p. 149-151). The borough of Tower Hamlets is one of the most ethnically diverse areas in London, with British Bangladeshis forming 32% of its population (TOWER HAMLETS COUNCIL, 2023). In *Brick Lane*, Chanu comments:

> Three point five people to one room. That's a council statistic, Chanu had told Nazneen. All crammed together. They can't stop having children, or they bring over all their relatives and pack them in like little fish in a tin. It's a Tower Hamlets official statistic: three point five Bangladeshis to one room (ALI, 2003a, p. 44).

Considering the obviously diverse character of London, how are these enclaves perceived by the rest of the city? Or how are these residents seen when they leave their residential space? A few passages in *Brick Lane* show that the South-Asian community is often considered a homogeneous category by other citizens in London, as if they existed only as a group, not as individuals. But Ali's depiction of diverse Bangladeshi characters in the community (Mrs. Islam and Razia, for example) serves to problematize this inadequate homogenization, acknowledging the existence of different practices and mechanisms of integration as well as the issue of power relations. The novel also discloses how ethnicity and religion have been significant markers of racial discrimination against migrant groups, particularly after the episode of 9/11. But *Brick Lane* also addresses internal prejudice in the community. Chanu argues, while talking to Dr. Azad, that the British collective imaginary fails to see the heterogeneous aspect of ethnic communities, ignoring the difference between the illiterate members living in his neighbourhood and himself: "These people here didn't know the difference between me, who stepped off an airplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only the lice on their heads" (ALI, 2003a, p. 27). For Chanu, sharing the common space of Brick Lane does not make him equal to other Bengali residents. Dr. Azad, on the other hand, remarks that the whole immigrant community is afflicted by the same disease. The overwhelming feeling of displacement and the failure of integration that can be part of the immigrant experience are diagnosed by the doctor as 'the Going Home Syndrome'. According to him, in an effort to deal with the homesickness, immigrants are always planning their return to their homeland, but can never save enough to go back. The impossibility of return leads to a transference of their realities from back home to the new place of living, which is critically observed by Chanu: "They don't ever really leave home. Their bodies are here but their hearts are back there. And anyway, look how they live: just re-creating the villages here" (ALI, 2003a, p. 24). Ironically, as will be discussed further, Chanu's aspirations as a man of words, do not lead him any further than those peasants even after years of living in London. His ultimate return to Bangladesh symbolizes a strong need to escape the experience of failure rather than a genuine affection for his previous home. Despite Nazneen's constant pleas to make plans to go to Dhaka to help Hasina, Chanu decides to return only when he realizes that his ideals have been shattered by the painful

reality of his immigrant experience. Nazneen, on the other hand, follows a reverse path. After feeling displaced for years, she slowly empowers herself and makes the decision not to return.

A remarkable passage that explores Nazneen's overwhelming feeling of estrangement during the early years of migration is when she is pregnant and impulsively decides to leave the apartment to escape from her sad thoughts. Walking with no sense of direction in the city, she immediately gets lost. Through Nazneen's eyes, we see how London outside the run-down area of Tower Hamlets is even more unfamiliar to her. The urban landscape achieves a futuristic, almost fantastic aspect, aggravating her feelings of displacement, invisibility, and helplessness.

> She looked up at a building as she passed. It was constructed almost entirely of glass, with a few thin rivets of steel holding it together. The entrance was like a glass fan, rotating slowly, sucking people in, wafting others out. [...] The building was without end. Above, somewhere, it crushed the clouds. The next building and the one opposite were white stone palaces. [...] Nazneen hobbling and halting, began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination (ALI, 2003a, p. 51).

Nazneen's perception of her surroundings – concrete buildings, grey skies, lack of green spaces – is a manifestation of how emotional capacity can be attributed to a range of external sources. She experiences emotional highs and lows while trying to adapt to and accept the space and place around her. In "Embodying Emotion Sensing Space: Introduction Emotional Geographies" (2004), Joyce Davidson and Christine Milligan highlight the key role of emotions in the process of belonging to a specific place, arguing that "a place must be *felt* to make sense" so "meaningful senses of space emerge only via movements *between* people and places" (DAVIDSON; MILLIGAN, 2004, p. 524). Following this notion, I argue that Nazneen's awareness of London's physical space directly corresponds to her inner emotional state. When her son Raqib gets ill, she has a feeling that "the city shattered. Everything was in pieces. She knew straight away, glimpsed it from the painful-white insides of the ambulance. Frantic neon signs. [...] These shards of the broken city" (ALI, 2003a, p. 120). Besides revealing the emotions and dismay of the protagonist, these lines show how Nazneen relates to London – a place that does not bring her any joy, familiarity, affection or recognition. This is when she defies fate for the first time, taking her son to the hospital, and not letting destiny decide his life as her mom did when she was born. But Raqib eventually dies, leading Nazneen to extreme guilt for going against fate. She then dreams of her dead mother blaming her: "You thought it was you who had the power. You thought that you would keep him alive. You decided you would be the one to choose [...] When you stood

between your son and his Fate, you robbed him of any chance" (ALI, 2003a, p. 474). As Nazneen's attempt to alter her predetermined fate fails, she spends the following years in London resigned to a passive acceptance of whatever comes her way.

Moreover, Nazneen's difficulty to adapt to the new environment is exacerbated by the language barrier. Upon her arrival in London, she does not know any English, so her communication is limited to a few Bangladeshi neighbours and her husband. When she asks his permission to attend language classes with her friend Razia, he says: "You're going to be a mother… Will that not keep you busy enough?" (ALI, 2003a, p. 75). For Nazneen, learning English represents a chance to escape the confines of her cluttered apartment and venture beyond the domestic space, as Razia's visits are still her only source of social interaction. For Chanu, Nazneen's becoming a mother is itself an impediment to any possible contact with the external world around her. In his patriarchal view, a proper or 'authentic' Bangladeshi housewife and mother naturally belongs at home. He even tells her she is lucky to have married 'an educated man' who does not beat her, as it often happens in their culture. In "Multiculturalism and Feminist Concerns in South Asian Diaspora Novels", Asim Karim and Zakia Nasir point out that: "Nazneen's diasporic sense becomes stronger when she walks across the narrow streets of Brick Lane and comes to the realization that her existence as a female in a multicultural alien society is neither acknowledged nor recognized" (KARIM; NASIR, 2014, p. 128). For Nazneen, gender operates together with ethnicity, making her twice marginalized. Her cultural background also justifies her husband's authoritarian behaviour and makes her feel invisible/unwanted by the rest of society. While she sees people "on a private, urgent mission to execute a precise and demanding plan" (ALI, 2003a, p. 51) walking the streets of London with a clear objective and purpose in life, Nazneen walks aimlessly, observing the world happening around her with people wearing different clothes while she moves around London "without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination. [...] But they were not aware of her. In the next instant she knew it" (ALI, 2003a, p. 52). The fact that Nazneen's Muslim identity plays a role in her estrangement mainly when outside the minority community is also highlighted by Naseem L. Aumeerally in the article "Reimagining Muslim Women Through the Prism of Minor Diasporic and National Literatures" (2017): "Nazneen's sense of alienation in London is essentially linked to her body being cast as 'other'; her presence seems to elicit a fear of contamination" (AUMEERALLY, 2016, p. 43). This can be observed in the passage when she is shopping with Razia and "the assistant hastily checked over her own clothes, smoothing down her own outfit as if it might become infected with a nasty anti-fashion virus" (ALI, 2003a, p. 334).

There is clear discrimination towards her looks because they reveal that she is an immigrant, a Muslim woman; thus, not welcome there. Nazneen slowly becomes aware of the influence exerted by the other's gaze on her identity construction:

> She was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well. If she wore a shirt and a jacket and a pair of high heels then what else would she do but walk around the glass palaces on Bishopgate, and talk into a slim phone" (ALI, 2003a, p. 297).

Considering a new dressing style becomes her tool to imagine a different positioning in a society that excludes her completely from its daily dynamics.

As mentioned earlier, the death of Nazneen's son marks a break in the narrative, which then focuses on a series of letters from Hasina and spans a period of almost fifteen years. Through her writing, we are informed that she still lives in Bangladesh. She has found a job in a garment factory, been a victim of rape, and worked as a prostitute, and as a babysitter. Among other predicaments, Hasina's husband beats her, she faces gender discrimination at work and witnesses violent acts against women around her. This part of the narrative unfolds in a scenario of political instability, poverty and corruption in which rigid patriarchal rules make life even worse for women. By telling the story of Hasina's friend, Monju, who is a victim of an acid attack by her own husband, Ali fictionalizes the gender-based violence that is prevalent in Bangladesh. According to a report written by the Acid Survivors Foundation, a non-profit organization in Dhaka, between 1999 and 2021, 3,853 people (over 80% female) fell victim to acid violence in Bangladesh, with males making up 99% of the perpetrators. In most instances, victims had acid thrown in their faces either because they had spurned the sexual advances of a male or rejected a marriage proposal. Besides serious physical damage, victims face social isolation, unemployment and discrimination (ACID SURVIVORS FOUNDATION, 2023). In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen 'luckily' does not get beaten by Chanu, however, he constantly threatens his daughters with violent words when his authority is challenged: "I'm going to tie her up and cut out her tongue. Tell the memsahib that when I have skinned her alive she will not be looking so pleased with herself" (ALI, 2003a, p. 212). His attitude towards the girls reflects the belief that women's bodies are inherently subordinate to men's power. This leads Chanu to feel entitled to punish his daughters while their mother watches without intervening. For years, Nazneen tolerates Chanu's control over the girls as she is still trapped in the system of patriarchal dominance that is part of her cultural background.

At this point, Nazneen's pleas to bring Hasina to live with them are dismissed by Chanu, who still has plans to return to Bangladesh for good and avoid the bad influence of certain British habits on his children's upbringing. Chanu's fantasy of Bangladesh as a place of cultural purity and happiness is dismantled by the narrative of Hasina's letters. However, he considers her misfortune a result of her irresponsible acts, blaming Hasina for what happened to her and undermining the plight she has been subjected to. Chanu's positioning against remaining in London is clearly related to his feeling of frustration and despair. Through his character, Ali exposes the experiences of disillusionment and exclusion of the immigrant experience. Unlike Nazneen, who held no expectations about her migration to London and just followed her 'fate', Chanu thought there would be a 'red carpet laid out' for him. But his long-awaited promotion at work never happens while he keeps taking courses and collecting diplomas, which are displayed on the walls of his cluttered apartment. Just like Hortense in *Small Island*, Chanu is a colonized subject who sees his extensive knowledge of English culture and history as a great advantage in relation to other Bangladeshis living in the community. But he is not treated with praise, respect, or admiration. Instead, Chanu faces financial troubles, unemployment and discrimination:

> He started every new job with a freshly spruced suit and a growing collection of pens. His face shone with hope. And then graved frustration, with resentment (…) Energetic numbers on his furiously written and rewritten business plans showed the way to fortunes [...] But he was slighted. By customers, by suppliers, by superiors and inferiors. He worked hard for respect but he could not find it (ALI, 2003a, p. 215).

In many ways, Chanu is a literary representation of the first-generation immigrants from Bangladesh and other places who arrived in the UK hoping to succeed mainly because of their academic background based on the English curriculum. His character represents what is described by Bhabha as a "mimic man", the colonized subject who mimics the civility and the discourse of the colonizer, in an effort to reduce the possibility of being treated as inferior (BHABHA, 1994, p. 86). Ironically enough, although he sees himself as a westernized man and is proud of his degree in English Literature, Chanu eventually identifies completely with Bangladesh. After about twenty years of failing to succeed despite his linguistic and academic skills, he vents his frustration

> I did this and that. Whatever I could. So much hard work, so little reward. [...] You know that saying? All the begging letters from home I burned. And I made two promises to myself. I will be a success [...] That's promise number one. Number two, I will go back home (ALI, 2003a, p. 27).

Chanu's narrative is an example of the legacy of colonialism. Initially, he celebrates English culture and language, but after years of unsuccessful attempts, Chanu gives up on making business plans and starts working as a taxi driver, coming to terms with what Britain has to offer him: "You see, all my life I have struggled. And for what? What good has it done? I have finished with all that. Now, I just take the money. I say thank you. I count it" (ALI, 2003a, p. 227). Chanu's gradual awareness of the nuances and setbacks of his own immigrant experience drives him to change his speech. In an effort to teach his daughters about the history and culture of Bangladesh, Chanu targets the impact of British colonialism on the Indian subcontinent and highlights the cultural practices and historical achievements of his own land. Fearful that his daughters will have limited or erroneous knowledge about their parents' land because they attend the British school system, Chanu challenges the way Bangladesh is portrayed in Western books as a land of 'flood and famine'. Therefore, his speech gains a subversive tone, revealing his choice to put his Bangladeshi roots in a place of worth.

Chanu's overlong speech to his daughters in which images of a mythic Bangladesh are invoked can be related to the notion of pedagogical narrative as discussed by Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* (1990). According to Bhabha, the use of a pedagogical narrative implies the reinforcement of dominant cultural values and a constant reference to past events of a national culture conveyed through stories, which shape the understanding of a nation by its people through a single perspective. Such a strategy was widely used by the colonizers in the process of forming their national identity and reassuring their power over the colonies. In *Brick Lane*, Chanu once again imitates the colonizer's approach and continues to be a 'mimic' man despite his apparent confidence and sense of superiority. His obsession with his homeland's past history and cultural legacy is interspersed with Hasina's disclosures about the harsh reality she faces contemporary Bangladesh. By denying the veracity of the content of the letters, Chanu excludes Hasina's marginalized perspective and the possibility of another version of Bangladesh, which is connected to the experiences of those that are not considered to be at the centre of the country's cultural and social roots. As it is argued by Bhabha, equally important to the identity formation of a nation is the awareness of other forms of knowledge and cultural expressions that contribute to a better understanding of a country's diversity. The institutionalized version of Bangladesh that permeates Chanu's fantasies becomes his tool to justify his return to the homeland. Further, the fear of more racism and discrimination against Muslims after the repercussions of the terrorist attack in New York on September 11th stimulates him to plan the family's return to Dhaka. Although

the experiences of migration and settlement are frustrating for both Chanu and Nazneen, Ali depicts the possibilities and challenges of the diaspora according to gender and power relations in a patriarchal setting. Unlike Chanu, Nazneen did not have the benefit of education and her dislocation to Britain was determined by the expectations of her family. Chanu was driven by his own aspirations and the conviction that his academic background would benefit him in the new homeland. Ironically, Nazneen is the one who eventually manages to feel integrated into the community.

As Chanu comes to grips with his awareness that after thirty years of living in London, he has failed to integrate and belong there, his relationship with Nazneen also takes a different path, helping her change the course of her life. By giving her a sewing machine, Chanu finally supports her idea of doing some garment work, while keeping her indoors. Initially, Chanu becomes Nazneen's middleman, bringing the pieces to be fixed, collecting the earnings, and "trying to work out the most profitable type of garment assignment" (ALI, 2003a, p. 219). Jobless at home, Chanu acts as a supervisor, exerting control over what Nazneen earns and viewing her effort as a source of hope for *his* plan to return to Bangladesh: "As you are all aware, we have decided – as a family – to return home. Your mother is doing everything possible to facilitate our dream through the old and honourable craft of tailoring" (ALI, 2003a, p. 220). Chanu's authoritarian behaviour represents the patriarchal structure Nazneen has endured, as an 'unspoilt girl from the village', who is treated as a servant and whose needs are never considered. Yet, the roles ironically switch. As Chanu's new computer remains unused and he becomes increasingly despondent, Nazneen takes up sewing and earns a significant income through her work from home, which allows her to pay the house bills and Chanu's debts with Mrs. Islam, the local money lender. The turning point in Nazneen's life shows a new pattern of gender relations, in which the patriarchal structure is somehow challenged by a new configuration of the home environment. Although she is still confined to the domestic space, working from home brings her a sense of autonomy and control that she has never experienced before.

The help and incentive from her neighbour Razia are also key in Nazneen's process of financial autonomy. Originally prohibited by her husband from working, Razia, once she becomes a widow, finally takes a job at a garment factory to support herself and her children, feeling free from the constraints her husband had imposed upon her. Following the same pattern as other Bangladeshi women in the community of Tower Hamlets, she sews all day in a factory in order to bring money home. This particular aspect of women labour is discussed by Gayatri Spivak in "Diasporas old and new: women in the transnational world" (1996).

Spivak argues that the crucial role played by women in the transnational world should be further investigated, with a clear reference to the incidence of homeworking, which "involves women who, within all the divisions of the world, and in modes of production extending from the precapitalist to the post-fordist, embracing all class processes, do piece-work at home with no control over wages" (SPIVAK, 1996, p. 246). According to Spivak, these women are often marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes even if they are active participants in transnational labour. Those who are employed in the manufacturing and service industries usually undergo exploitative working conditions and low wages, and when they try to advocate for their rights, their pleas are frequently ignored or silenced. Spivak also points out that the capitalist exploitation of female migrant workers indicates how the gendered subaltern subject has become an inevitable part of a global economic process happening in cities like London.

In *Brick Lane,* this subaltern subject is represented by the characters of Nazneen, Razia and other women who work in the sewing business although they might not be aware of the large system of production they take part in. Similarly, non-diasporic women might participate in the same system of labour exploitation, as it is shown through the character of Hasina, who works long hours and in very bad conditions in a sweatshop in Bangladesh: "Job in new factory I am machinist real woman job now" (ALI, 2003a, p. 153). Saskia Sassen uses the term "offshore proletariat" to refer to the group of people who work in low-wage jobs in areas established by multinational corporations where labour laws and regulations are relaxed or nonexistent. Belonging to this group are South-Asian women immigrants, who constitute a significant part of the cheap labour pool working in sweatshops around the world. Nazneen and Hasina are representatives of this group of women who have low-paid and manual jobs that service the strategic sectors of global cities, integrating a transnational economic system albeit not viewed as such. As is explained by Sassen: "Immigrant work environments in large cities, often subsumed under the notion of the ethnic economy and the informal economy are rarely recognized as possibly part of the global information economy" (SASSEN, 1998, p. 87).

In *Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Women's Fiction* (2016), Ruvani Ranasinha draws attention to the role played by female-authored diasporic South-Asian fictional narratives that address issues within the context of globalization, such as the international division of labour. Ranasinha asserts that these literary works enrich contemporary discussions that focus on the different ways globalization processes affect men and women migrants. The scholar sees in *Brick Lane* "a new diasporic consciousness of the intersections

between class, gender, the subaltern and the workings of global capital" (RANASINHA, 2016, p. 39). This consciousness is present through the journey of characters like Razia and Nazneen, for example. Rather than focusing on the preservation of traditional cultural practices and values, there is an emphasis on the fluid and dynamic nature of identity formation, which can be characterized by a sense of in-betweenness, when individuals negotiate ongoing processes of identification with different aspects of more than one culture. Ranasinha also mentions that Ali's choice to get inspiration from Naila Kabeer's *The Power to Choose* (2000) symbolizes her clear engagement in bringing to fiction the issue of feminization of labour:

> The positive effects that the global consumer culture represents for some appear to come at the expense of women like Nazneen and Hasina in *Brick Lane*, who bear the brunt of the capital accumulation by a few. In this respect, the novel strongly corroborates Marxist discussions of how gender is integral to the division of labour and the ability of capital to maximise profits (RANASINHA, 2016, p. 59).

Through the characters of Hasina, Razia and Nazneen, it is possible to identify the link between London and Dhaka regarding the exploitation of women factory workers. In both cities, there is abuse, low wages, bad working conditions, and long hours. As Razia points out, "Sewing all day and all day [...] A serious thing, though, the business with the machine work. Ruins the hands, the back, the eyes. What else is this body for? I'm just using it up for my children" (ALI, 2003a, p. 198). A similar pattern is described when Nazneen starts doing the sewing job at home: "Nazneen continued with her piecework. If she worked fast, if she didn't make mistakes, she could earn as much as three pounds and fifty pence in one hour. Maybe a little bit more" (ALI, 2003a, p. 225). According to Ranasinha, Nazneen represents a "cramped, constricted, monotonous existence in London's inner cities estates" (RANASINHA, 2016, p. 62), where women migrants are part of a capitalist system of exploitation and are also expected to fulfil domestic duties, like cleaning and cooking. In this sense, Ali showcases how the issue of class impacts Nazneen's journey as well. As her place of living in London is determined by Chanu's background and low-paying job, her options are limited. Still, by joining the community of working-class women immigrants in Brick Lane, Nazneen slowly finds her space among them. Through her work, she is enabled to finally insert herself into community life, where her autonomous and creative identity emerges.

Despite all the predicaments, the domestic environment gradually becomes not only the space for Nazneen's productive labour but also for her sexual and political awakening. After meeting Karim, the British-Bangladeshi middleman who enters her life "with a bale of

jeans over his broad shoulder" (ALI, 2003a, p. 221), Nazneen initiates a process of acknowledging her desires and transgressing her own self-expectations as a Muslim woman from the village. As usual, with careful observation, Nazneen perceives Karim as a different but appealing kind of Muslim, who stammers in Bengali but expresses himself confidently in English. His self-assurance and body movements arouse her immediately, disrupting her still and quite 'inexistent' physical awareness and sexuality. Karim is portrayed as belonging to the Western culture; his dress code, his language and his purposeful orientation are radically different from Chanu's. However, he receives Salaat alerts on his phone and recites the Qur'an, signalling his commitment to the traditions of Islam. His hybrid identity – born in England but deeply attached to Bengali/Muslim practices – is a source of curiosity and attraction to Nazneen, who sees in Karim an alternative to the male gender figure she has been used to. Karim brings her not only more work to be done but also another kind of male gaze, which awakens her eroticism and makes her feel wanted, heard and meaningful. While Chanu rambles relentlessly without listening to Nazneen, Karin makes her feel as if she has said 'a weighty piece'. The fact that she receives Karim in her apartment and then in her bed, while Chanu and the kids are out, indicates how the domestic space is slowly transformed from a place of resignation and imprisonment to one of empowerment, freedom, and transgression:

> She twisted her hands together. She longed to be in the flat, Karim with his magazine, she with her sewing. He would walk around and fill up the space. He would walk around as if he were learning to fill the space. Each time he came now he inhabited the flat a little more (ALI, 2003a, p. 307).

Nazneen's apartment slowly ceases to signify seclusion and oppression, becoming a site of discovery and enlightenment. The boredom of her daily chores is replaced with joy and excitement:

> She cleaned her flat, and even wiping the floor after the toilet had flooded was not so tiresome if it was done with a song on the lips and in the heart. It was as if the conflagration of her bouts with Karim had cast a special light on everything, a dawn light after a life lived in twilight. It was as if she had been born deficient and only now been gifted the missing sense (ALI, 2003a, p. 324).

In addition, it is through her relationship with Karim that Nazneen has access to the political aspect of the Muslim environment she inhabits. She sees leaflets circulate around the area of Brick Lane claiming that "the Islamification of the neighbourhood has gone too far" (ALI, 2003a, p. 275), revealing a movement of repression against Muslim cultural expression in the local council. Through Karim's engagement with the Bengal Tigers, Ali represents

the attitude of Bangladeshi-British Muslims who struggle against the discriminatory portrayal of Islam in the UK. Despite being born there, they are often viewed as outsiders. More often than not, Islam has erroneously been associated with terrorism; the general lack of understanding of Eastern cultures in the West has helped to create the notion that its followers are all extremely dangerous to society. However, as it is noted by Jane Hiddleston in "Shapes and Shadows: Unveiling the Immigrant in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*", the novel challenges these preconceptions: "Ali confronts these stereotypes, and presents the characters' anger not as a mythical, incomprehensible hatred of the West but as a desperate reaction to their unequal status in that society" (HIDDLESTON, 2005, p. 66). Thus, the strong need to express pride in having a Muslim identity during the Bengal Tigers' meetings, for example, serves more as a claim for justice and recognition than as a radical act of defiance. Nazneen's increasing interest in Karim leads her to attend one of the meetings, where she sees that other Muslim women, wearing the hijab and even the burkha, are capable of expressing their political views despite the supposedly submissive nature of their dress code. As Sandra Almeida remarks, the burkha might be one of the most visible signs of male oppression against women, but it can also be worn as a symbol of their Muslim pride, a rejection of Islamic constraints on freedom of speech, as well as a refusal to conform to western behaviour patterns (ALMEIDA, 2009, p. 157). For the first time, Nazneen sees her religion become a political issue and observes Muslims from different backgrounds connected through Islam, and debating what should be done to safeguard their culture and rights in the face of discrimination. A slight feeling of empowerment overcomes her when she gets to vote and Karim is elected the chairman: "By raising her hand, or not raising it, she could alter the course of events, of affairs in the world of which she knew nothing" (ALI, 2003a, p. 258). Always taught to remain silent by her mother and not to ask questions because she is a woman, Nazneen speaks with a gesture, breaking the rooted pattern that ruled her life for so many years. Through her relationship with Karim, Nazneen has access to new information and starts questioning the world and her religion: "His knowledge shamed her. She learned about her Muslim brother and sisters. She learned how many they were, how scattered, and how tortured. She discovered Bosnia. He shamed her. And he excited her" (ALI, 2003a, p. 198). Gradually, she starts transgressing social and cultural conventions that she had never challenged before. Her physical awakening gives her a new understanding and perception of her body, not as a mother or a dutiful wife, but as a woman making a choice. The unacceptable act of a Muslim woman committing adultery can be seen as subversion at the highest level, which pushes Nazneen's way forward at her own pace. Ironically, passion and

religion fill up Nazneen's process of transgression, leading to her new sense of self. At home, there is also a change regarding the upbringing of Shahana and Bibi. Rather than passively accepting Chanu's orders, Nazneen steps up, challenging his sole authority over their daughters. When Shahana is forbidden by her father to join a festival in the community and is threatened to "get beaten to a bloody pulp", Nazneen instantly reacts: "Nazneen stood between her husband and her daughter. "I say she can go", she said, but as they were both shouting, she could not be heard. "I say she can go", she yelled. They were silent and shocked, as she ripped out their tongues (ALI, 2003a, p. 378).

Besides showing religion as a source of faith, strength, passion and political wisdom, *Brick Lane* also exposes the unfortunate and discriminatory labelling of Muslims as radical fundamentalists. The narrative focuses on London in the wake of September 11, when violent demonstrations against the presence of Muslims sweep the city:

> A pinch of New York dust blew across the ocean and settled on the Dogwood Estate. Sorupa's daughter was the first, but not the only one. Walking in the street, on her way to college, she had her hijab pulled off. Razia wore her Union Jack sweatshirt and it was spat on (ALI, 2003a, p. 400).

By fictionalizing "the international suspicion and demonization of Muslim identities since the 9/11 attacks" (RANASINHA, 2016, p. 131), *Brick Lane* provides space for the articulation of racism in the face of religion in the contemporary world. The novel exposes the anti-Muslim sentiment that became a harsh reality in the US and in Europe, especially after the episode in New York in 2001. When discussing the many forms of racism in contemporary Britain, William Shankley and James Rhodes observe that anti-Muslim racism or Islamophobia has become deeply entrenched within British society over the past years. The 2001 riots in Bradford, Burnley, and Oldham – the latter mentioned in the novel – proved to be pivotal events, which exposed the increasing manifestation of hostility and exclusion against Muslims (SHANKLEY; RHODES, 2020, p. 214). After the London bombings in 2005, many British Muslims have become targets of increased hostility and the issues of multiculturalism and the integration of minorities have been highly debated by government authorities. Without a doubt, the segregation of these groups to a run-down area of London reinforces their status as outsiders, others, the ones who must be constrained to the surroundings of their own culture and are not welcomed to move freely into other parts of the city. In *Brick Lane*, the discriminatory facet of British society that sees Muslim citizens as "the undesirable other" is represented by the radical group Lion Hearts, which views Islam as

a religion of hate and spreads anti-immigrant propaganda around Brick Lane, stating that "this is England" and they will not tolerate the extremists that challenge the purity of British identity. Meanwhile, the atmosphere is also tense in Bangladesh. Hasina's letters inform on political tension, racism, patriarchal oppression, child labour and environmental problems. Although Nazneen thinks about disclosing her affair with Karim to Hasina, she ends up not doing it, maybe out of guilt and shame.

From the moment Nazneen starts making choices in her life, the power of fate begins to fade and, consequently, her nostalgic memories and dreams about her childhood become less frequent: "The village was leaving her. Sometimes a picture would come. Vivid; so strong she could smell it. More often, she tried to see and could not. It was as if the village was caught up in a giant fisherman's net and she was pulling at the fine mesh with bleeding fingers" (ALI, 2003a, p. 230). But this transition is not devoid of conflict for her. As Nazneen's devotion to her religion has always been a source of strength and relief, she finds herself at a crossroads, reflecting on her role as a dutiful wife and mother and the un-Islamic deed of having an extramarital affair. She eventually has a nervous breakdown, which leaves her in bed for days, experiencing hallucinations mainly about her deceased son and mother, who keeps telling her: "It's easy. You just have to endure" (ALI, 2003a, p. 349). Her awareness of a fragmented existence that is torn between doing what is expected of her and surrendering to her desires leaves Nazneen in a state of reflection over what has become of her life. As Karim's political stance grows more radical, he changes his dressing style, leaving jeans, shirts, and trainers behind and growing a beard. His change of clothing and behaviour affects the way Nazneen sees him and makes her question their relationship. She realizes that she created an image of him, without any significant understanding of his true self. Similarly, Karim's attraction to her is based on an idealized image of a Muslim woman, who somehow represents the imaginary stability of the homeland that he never visited: "How did Karim see her? The real thing, he'd said. She was his real thing. A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her" (ALI, 2003a, p. 497). In "Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form: Realism and the Postcolonial Subject in *Brick Lane*", Aliston Cormack explains Karim's idealization:

> The authenticity that he perceives in Nazneen's identity is bound by culture *and* gender. Unlike the Westernized girls who presumably pose a threat to his sense of ownership, Nazneen does not display her sexuality to anyone but him. Nor does she question his rather confused understanding of religion and politics but instead listens to and registers his monologues. [...] Nazneen represents the imaginary stability of

> homeland and a receptive femininity to bolster his sense of self (CORMACK, 2006, p. 705).

Nazneen's relationship with Karim can be seen as an interplay of gender roles that prove to be convenient for both in different ways. Her awareness of their dynamics is clear when she tells him that "they made each other up", based on their need to fill a gap in their imagined idea of a partner. Their mutual misrepresentation is therefore a result of their individual process of self-discovery. Most importantly, what motivates Nazneen to reject Karim's marriage proposal and end their relationship is not guilt for the sin they have committed in the eyes of their Muslim beliefs, but her awareness that fate is not the master of her decisions. Although their connection was a key element in her process of independence and self-reliance, she does not want to commit any further. When demanded an explanation she simply tells him: "I don't want to marry you" (ALI, 2003a, p. 494).

Another remarkable event that affects Nazneen's sense of self is the revelation in Hasina's letter that their mother committed suicide. The lessons about Fate and the importance of acceptance and endurance had always been her guiding principle. Yet, her mother's act of despair meant exactly the opposite; she could not endure her life and gave up. At this point, Nazneen has already transgressed the limits imposed by her Muslim heritage, by committing adultery with Karim. However, her devotion to Islam is continually a source of strength, orientation, and comfort. Ali's representation of different possibilities through which gender is expressed is definitely one of the strengths of *Brick Lane*. Through the partly westernized characters of Razia and Mrs. Azad, we see the changing nature of Muslim women who manage to adapt to new cultural practices, often abandoning former religious precepts. But Nazneen does not need to reject her Islamic practices in order to feel empowered. What happens is a change in her engagement with religion. As Ranasinha suggests:

> The novel explicitly rejects narrow interpretations of Islam that draw on the literal translation of the word Islam as 'submission' and the equation of Islam with fatalism through Nazneen's recognition that faith need not rule out free will and that active agency must be exercised even in the service of faith (RANASINHA, 2016, p. 167).

Nazneen's faith is what drives her to challenge Mrs. Islam, the older Bangladeshi immigrant who refuses to assimilate into British culture and represents the feminine side of oppression in Tower Hamlets. Through her character, Ali highlights the tension between tradition and modernity in the community, for example, when Mrs. Islam criticizes the young

Bengali immigrants who are embracing the Western culture and shows her disgust about the way the British live: “They do what they want. It is a private matter. Everything is a private matter. That is how the white people live” (ALI, 2003a, p. 88). Nevertheless, the so-called ‘respectable type’ by Chanu’s standards is a fearless usurer who exploits the members of the community. After dealing with Mrs. Islam payment requests for a long time, Nazneen finally confronts her, resorting to the Qur’an to test the old lady’s faith and character:

> She thought she might be shouting, but she really could not help it. ‘Not interest? Not a usurer? Let’s see then. Swear it’. She ran across where the Book was kept. Glass crunched beneath her sandals. ‘Swear on the Qur’an. And I’ll give you the two hundred (ALI, 2003a, p. 487).

Finally getting rid of Mrs. Islam’s extortion, Nazneen is relieved and confident that her faith helped her decide what to do: “Gradually, a thought began to form. God provided a way. Nazneen smiled. God provided a way, and I found it” (ALI, 2003a, p. 488). Once more, Nazneen’s faith is not an impediment to her sense of autonomy, but a pathway to access her inner strength and confidence. Even after ‘sinning’ and doubting her ‘good Muslim’ role, she is certain that Mrs. Islam is not behaving like one and feels entitled to demand respect for her faith. By showing this turning point “the novel interleaves issues of Islamic culture and female emancipation by suggesting that Muslim women have agency in non-obvious ways” (RANASINHA, 2016, p. 148). A similar strategy is present in the depiction and evaluation of dress codes throughout the novel. At first, while wearing the sari appears to signify South Asian women’s passive behaviour and loyalty to their religious legacy – as is shown by Karim’s admiration of Nazneen’s looks – the western dressing style attracts Nazneen for its symbol of free movement and an assertive attitude over the body. However, when Nazneen’s view of the world and of herself changes, the western clothes and style suddenly become fake, uninteresting, and oppressive: “Nazneen looked at the couple on the television screen, the false smiles, the made-up faces, the demented illusion of freedom chasing around their enclosure” (ALI, 2003a, p. 395).

Furthermore, the choice of wearing or not the sari among the community members is linked to Ali’s presentation of the possibility of divergent diasporic identities. In *Brick Lane,* the sari embodies both personal and political affiliations depending on the characters. The garment serves as an expression of their subjectivities, demonstrating its ability to encapsulate the multifaceted aspect of the diasporic experience. For Mrs. Islam, for example, the sari reflects her unwillingness to assimilate: “Winter and summer she wore the same thing: a

cardigan over a sari, black socks, carpet slippers. She would not change for the seasons. They did not bend to her and she would not bend to them" (ALI, 2003a, p. 87). Even after many years living in Britain, she openly judges those in the community who choose to mingle with people from other cultures: "even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs" (ALI, 2003a, p. 21). Her radicalism is contrasted with the behaviour adopted by Razia, who does not feel comfortable with wearing the sari and eventually replaces it with a Western style of clothing, showing her inclination to assimilate into the host culture. As the narrator describes, "She was wearing a garment she called a tracksuit. She would never, so she said, wear a sari again" (ALI, 2003a, p. 95). Another form of identity negotiation through the dress code is presented by the character of Mrs. Azad, a Bengali immigrant who shocks Nazneen with her westernized appearance and unapologetic speech: "Listen, when I'm in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work. I work with white girls and I'm just one of them. If I want to come home and eat curry, that's my business" (ALI, 2003a, p. 116). Although Mrs. Azad does not deny her Bangladeshi origins completely, she does not feel forced to maintain practices of her original culture in the new homeland. Through her character, Ali presents what Stuart Hall defines as 'a translated subject': someone who becomes able to create a new cultural identity that is neither entirely one culture nor the other:

> [...] they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, belong at one and the same time to several "homes" (and to no one particular "home"). People belonging to such cultures of hybridity have had to renounce the dream or ambition of rediscovering any kind of "lost" cultural purity, or ethnic absolutism. They are irrevocably translated. (HALL, 1992, p. 310).

Throughout the novel, we see multiple meanings given to the sari according to the characters' subjectivities and experiences. In the end, the image of the sari as a symbol of acceptance and oppression is deconstructed, as it enables Nazneen to embrace her identity as fluid and unstable, embodying a transformed version of herself.

Undeniably, Nazneen's shared experiences with the women characters are extremely significant in shaping the way she asserts her own identity as a Muslim woman in Britain. There's the continuous parallel/contrast with Hasina, the initial puzzlement and then admiration for Razia, the shock at Mrs. Azad's westernized behaviour, the confrontation with Mrs. Islam, and the ongoing support from her daughters. Razia and Mrs Azad have also migrated from Bangladesh but dealt with the dislocation to Britain in different ways. The observation of these assimilating patterns brings shock and curiosity. Though intrigued at

first, Nazneen comes to accept the heterogeneous aspect of her own culture in the hostland. Once more *Brick Lane* deconstructs the idea of homogeneity in ethnic minority groups. Through Shahana's and Bibi's conflicting relationship with Chanu, Ali shows the common clash between first and second-generation immigrants that have different ways of assimilating and integrating into British culture. The same happens to Razia's children, Tarik and Shefali. For this generation, London has always been their home and there is no sense of displacement. Despite Chanu's insistence on teaching them about Bangladesh and forcing them to speak Bengali, the girls, particularly Shahana, are completely disconnected from their parents' cultural background, but feel part of British society. This happens because their identity construction has been influenced by British cultural patterns, which have contributed to their sense of belonging there, not in Bangladesh, a place they have never been to.

Through an act of sisterhood and also as an assertion of their identity, the daughters teach English to Nazneen, allowing her to gradually communicate with them using the language when Chanu is not around: "But it was the girls who taught her. Without lessons, textbooks, or Razia's "key phrases". Their method was simple: they demanded to be understood" (ALI, 2003a, p. 204). Besides, Shahana constantly defies her father's authority, challenging the expected patriarchal setting that her mom and other women from her family have been subjected to: "Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans. [...] If she could choose between baked beans and dal it was no contest" (ALI, 2003a, p. 188). Shahana's awareness of her place in the world also affects Nazneen's self-perception. She sees in her daughter an early confidence that she only finds in herself later in life.

Shahana's determination not to leave for Bangladesh makes her run away from home. When Nazneen goes out in despair looking for her daughter in the middle of a race riot, what follows is a detailed description of her movement along the streets, all named, signalling that Nazneen is becoming more familiar with the spatial geography of London. The random right and left directions that characterized her rare outings in her first years in London leaving her lost before are then replaced by a specific purpose: to find her daughter. By so doing, Nazneen challenges the label of invisibility that is assigned to ethnic minorities and takes up a public space that she did not consider available to her before. Her claim for recognition is clear when she confronts the policeman blocking the street: "Why can't I go through? [...] She put her face right up to the policeman's face. Do you see me now? Do you hear me?" (ALI, 2003a, p. 514). Ultimately, Ali shows Nazneen asserting authority over her physical surroundings to convey the notion that she is finally taking hold of her life.

In *Brick Lane,* the role of London is first problematized and then redefined through the eyes of the protagonist. From the moment Nazneen changes her self-perception, she changes her positioning in the city, and she begins to see London through a different lens, acknowledging her role in the shaping of that society, once strange and hostile. The city that once represented imprisonment, estrangement and hostility evokes different associations in Nazneen once she makes the decision to remain there with her daughters. According to Davidson and Milligan, a better understanding of the many senses of space could help us "appreciate the emotionally dynamic spatiality of contemporary social life" (DAVIDSON; MILLIGAN, 2015, p. 524). When Nazneen's emotional understanding of London changes, the city takes on a new character for her. The acceptance pattern that ruled her eyes for so many years gives way to rejection of her lover's marriage proposal and of her husband's total control over her life, and, more importantly, of her own tendency to underestimate her role in changing her destiny: "But I'm not going [...] It occurred to her that *she* could have done this before. What kept her tied to the corner of the room? The children are not going" (ALI, 2003a, p. 493).

I believe *Brick Lane* exposes the possibility of diasporas being "the sites of hopes and new beginnings", as scholar Avtar Brah considers in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contested Identities* (1996). The novel portrays immigration as an experience that may ultimately result in empowerment. As Nazneen learns how to cope with the feelings of 'unbelonging' and 'in-betweenness', she eventually realizes that her immigrant identity has the potential to be critical and emancipating. After Chanu's departure, she takes a more creative position at work, not only sewing but also designing and making clothes. Nazneen and Razia eventually become business partners and venture into a more autonomous working role together with other women from the community. This event shows how female solidarity provides security and a way forward. Through the shared experience of oppression, these women come together to resist it. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the experiences of Hortense and Queenie in *Small Island* constitute literary examples of the feminist solidarity pedagogical model proposed by Chandra Mohanty (2003). In *Kehinde*, the same model is represented by the relationship between Kehinde and Moriammo. In *Brick Lane*, female solidarity also figures in the friendship between Nazneen and Razia and later in their business partnership. Levy's, Emecheta's and Ali's texts offer a challenge to the generalized assumption that oppressed women are homogeneous, powerless and passive beings.

For many years, Nazneen sees her flat in Tower Hamlets as setting the limits of her existence, but as the narrative unfolds, her journey towards self-discovery is reinforced by a

reconfiguration of her domestic environment, which becomes a place of empowerment. The small apartment located in a wall-bricked neighbourhood is where Nazneen reaches autonomy and decides to free herself from the patriarchal constraints represented both by her husband and her lover. Her process of emancipation is similar to Kehinde's, who also needs to let go of certain traditional cultural practices in order to accept a more fluid and flexible sense of belonging. By choosing to remain in London, Nazneen is committed to making her personal space a permanent dwelling space, rather than conforming to the notion of returning to her homeland. Therefore, Nazneen's desire to claim the domestic space is linked to her claim to belonging: "She looked up at the wallpaper, shyly turning it on itself. Nothing would stick to those walls. They would have to be scraped clean and begun afresh" (ALI, 2003a, p. 478). Even a new image of England begins forming in her head: "It was a picture of England. Roses around the door. Nazneen had never seen this England but now, idly, the idea formed that she would visit" (ALI, 2003a, p. 479).

The final scene shows Razia and Nazneen's daughters surprising her by taking her to ice-skate. Even though Nazneen is not dressed 'appropriately' – that is, just like the women she has seen ice-skating on TV – the scene shows her delight to go through everything involved in the experience:

> In front of her was a huge white circle, bounded by four-foot-high boards. Glinting, dazzling, enchanting ice. She looked at the ice and slowly it revealed itself. The criss-cross patterns of a thousand surface scars, the colours that shifted and changed in the lights, the unchanging nature of what lay beneath. A woman swooped by on one leg. No sequins, no short skirt. She wore jeans. She raced on, on two legs (ALI, 2003a, p. 541).

This closure confirms Nazneen's sense of empowerment "in the ability to choose clothing as a way of taking control of personal identity and thus evading the determinism of fate" (BENTLEY, 2008, p. 901). The sari, a symbol of her restricting patriarchal culture, may be combined with the flexible and loose movements of ice-skating not only because she is in England and she can do whatever she likes, as Razia says, but because Nazneen has come to terms with her subjectivity. As Pallavi Rastogi beautifully reflects:

> We are left to imagine Nazneen gracefully gliding across the ice in a Dhakai silk sari, a somewhat heavy-handed metaphor for finally learning how to traverse the cold, slippery whiteness of the English landscape. The daughters are able to teach their mother the cultural mores of a country, which is theirs precisely because this sense of ownership – of national belonging – gives them an ease in and with England that their parents will never have (RASTOGI, 2016, p. 89).

Nazneen's ice-skating epitomizes the combination of British and Bangladeshi cultures, with the vivid hues of her traditional dress contrasting with the cold and white features of the English winter. Her body then becomes the symbol of this fusion. A clear representation of her hybridity. Nazneen's identity is not confined to fixed categories but is formed through a "dialogue between the narration of her origin and the reality of the history through which she lives" (CORMACK, 2006, p.702).

The slow integration into the new culture and a new perspective about the events of her past enables Nazneen to realize a new, more powerful identity, which does not erase her Muslim legacy or cultural roots but makes space for the acceptance of a restored view of herself. She does not need to change her clothes or give up her faith to continue her trajectory in London. Ice-skating for the first time becomes the physical consolidation of the liberation she has managed to achieve. Nazneen's body simultaneously represents two traditions without hierarchy. Ultimately, *Brick Lane* leaves space for reflection on the future of the character of Nazneen and particularly of her daughters. When interviewed by C. S. Bhagya (2021), Monica Ali expressed her interest in writing about Shahana and Bibi and their future as women born in London to Bangladeshi immigrant parents. If we consider their characters as credible representations of second-generation immigrants, a few questions may arise: how would their story be in a more discriminatory and exclusive London, in times of post-Brexit? Would they still be living in Tower Hamlets, following in her mother's footsteps in the sewing business? Or would they be in another part of London, away from Banglatown? In *London Youth, Religion and Politics* (2016), Daniel DeHanas explores the ways in which young people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds in London engage with religion and politics, and how these domains are intersected and shape one another. Through interviews and case studies, DeHanas shows how some second and third-generation immigrants have dealt with issues of discrimination and multiculturalism. According to his research data, the majority of London youths share the positive value of diversity and multiculturalism, as it's the case of Shadedul, a 23-year-old Bangladeshi who says: "When I hear English, I think of white people. But when I hear London, I think multicultural" (DEHANAS, 2016, p. 62).

Paradoxically, Brick Lane is still viewed as a segregated neighbourhood for the disadvantaged, although it is located at the centre of London, adjacent to the city's financial hub. Over recent decades, the area has certainly gained popularity as a tourist spot with its curry houses, street markets and vintage shops, but it continues to be associated with social deprivation, criminal activity and poor housing. On top of that, recent news discloses that the

capitalist boom in the region has not spared its residents from its controversial effects (ALI, 2022). According to an article published by Runnymede Trust, an organization that undertakes research and collects data in Britain in order to expose the impact of social inequality on minority communities, recent processes of urban change and gentrification have radically transformed the area of Brick Lane over the last 15 years. What was once the largest concentration of curry restaurants in Britain, is now interspersed with Swedish delicatessens, French patisseries, pizza parlours and vegan cafés (LIDHER, 2020). Community activists have protested to fight against gentrification and preserve the area's cultural heritage which is under threat. Some residents, however, think that the path to progress involves adjusting to the city and upholding the coexistence that forms the foundation of the Bangladeshi experience in Britain. That is the case of Mabrur Ahmed, a third-generation Bangladeshi born in Birmingham who proudly explains: "Adaptation is key. It's deep within us. To balance your heritage, be true to your roots, and take the best parts of being British is the way we forge our own spaces that cater to both specific groups, and to everyone" (MUSADDIQUE, 2021). Ahmed's words are definitely wise. In a city that still celebrates ethnic diversity despite Brexit and the ongoing debate about immigration, it seems that a pragmatic attitude can help navigate the inevitable polarization that has become part of the nation's social and economic spheres. This can be articulated with Doreen Massey's view that the immigrant population in many big cities like London have been blamed for the rise in high crime rates and other social problems. By excluding these communities not only geographically, but also in social and political terms, the 'privileged' inhabitants claim their 'right' to own the city. But the London of minority communities is a fundamental piece of London's diverse character. There seems to be no room for a single definition of what is to be a Londoner nowadays as drawing the lines around the city has become a complex target. Massey argues that geographical boundaries are not enough because the city's economic and political factors transgress its physical lines, directly impacting the rest of the country.

In *Brick Lane*, just like in *Small Island,* the spatial configuration of London is contested and negotiated. The physical and social space of the city reveals both the enriching and conflicting aspects of its own diversity according to the characters' physical and subjective journeys. Their identities as well as the spaces they inhabit are not fixed and stable but fluid and dynamic. For this reason, *Brick Lane* offers alternative perspectives on the experiences of Bangladeshi immigrants living in contemporary London. Nazneen's story reflects the lives of other women who inhabit minority communities, women who might remain invisible in the eyes of a big city that does not pause even to shrug. But her fortune

changes because her character changes, just like it is stated in one of the epigraphs of the novel: “A man’s character is his fate”, by Heraclitus. The message in the quotation is clear: a person’s destiny is not predetermined, but rather shaped by their strength, values, and choices. Metaphorically, Nazneen redraws the path that was once believed to belong to her fate. Once she starts following her inner compass, she realizes that new routes could be borne and changed, eventually becoming the writer of her own story. Similar to Kehinde, she is the real ‘rebel’ in the end.

# CONCLUSION

Writing is a means of reclaiming territory.
*Grace Feuerverger*

All fiction is homesickness.
*Rosemary George*

You must write, and read, as if
your life depended on it; to write across the chalkboard,
putting up there in public the words you have dredged;
sieved up in dreams, from behind screen memories,
out of silence—words you have dreaded
and needed in order to know you exist.
*Adrienne Rich*

The themes of dislocation, settlement and belonging that I had been studying in works of fiction started to be part of my reality after I moved to Lisbon in 2020. Motivated by a desire to nurture a romantic relationship and fuelled by a deep fascination for the land of my grandparents, who had migrated to Brazil in the 1930s with no intentions of returning to Portugal, I embarked on a personal journey. When I visited Lisbon for the first time, I remember thinking: this place could be my home as well. Whether it was the climate, the ocean, the culinary delights, or the sound of the Portuguese language, something resonated within me. Emotional geographies serve as key pieces in unravelling this puzzle. As Davidson and Milligan highlight:

> Without doubt, our emotions *matter*. They have tangible effects on our surroundings and can shape the very nature and experience of our being-in-the-world. Emotions can clearly alter the way the world *is* for us, affecting our sense of time as well as space. Our sense of who or what we are is continually (re)shaped by how we feel (DAVIDSON; MILLIGAN, 2004, p. 524).

Beyond the emotional connection that took root here, fragments of Brazil that are woven into the fabric of Lisbon's people and places give me a sense of familiarity and

belonging. Portugal and Brazil, bound by a history of colonial ties, share such profound similarities that it can be overwhelming at times. Still, Lisbon is very different from Rio, with another kind of light, and another way of life. While I miss Rio, my heart has found a place in Lisbon. I am sure both cities inhabit a place within me and I believe my in-betweenness can be my safe haven. For this reason, I feel that this dissertation has become more than a research or academic achievement. It is definitely part of my journey of finding another kind of belonging here and understanding the intricacies of the process of migrating at a later stage in life, with certain expectations and also some fears. Through the reading of fiction, we can look into our subjectivities and how they are shaped by history, culture, emotions, memories, and our relationships with people and places. In an interview published in 2017, Vietnamese-American writer Ocean Vuong said: "In literature, we get to stop, we get to control how we read, we get to go back and use critical thinking to say either 'yes, this is true' or 'no this is not,' and then respond accordingly" (MURPHY, 2017).

The perspective that I have adopted in the analysis of the three novels seeks to expose and challenge the tradition that has silenced and marginalized the stories of women who have dealt with the effects of colonization in their countries of origin or in their adopted countries. Articulating the experiences of the protagonists Hortense, Kehinde and Nazneen in the context of the contemporary debate about the impact of migratory movements and their complexities encourages the reflection on the specific situation of women migrants, particularly the ones from former British colonies. As mentioned before, the reading of fiction can be a rich source to understand diverse perspectives, making it a valuable tool in cultural and social change processes through the subversion of long-established practices that have limited the creative expression of specific groups. The selected works of Levy, Emecheta and Ali reveal their capacity to confront conventional representations of migrant women, redefine notions of home within both personal and societal contexts, and navigate the complex relationship between identity formation and the multifaceted dynamics of diaspora. Their writing carves out "a new kind of space at the centre" as Hall observed. This space in the literary field indicates the prominence of texts exploring the diaspora's changing nature and the specificities that affect a sense of belonging. These narratives, which are often influenced by the writers' background and, in the case of Buchi Emecheta, widely known as partly autobiographical novels, articulate emotions and experiences in ways that history cannot.

I have sought to demonstrate how *Small Island*, *Kehinde* and *Brick Lane* are more than iconic creative works of fiction, but stories that expose the fissures and fusions caused by colonialism on the lives of diasporic subjects. Since the three protagonists are women, the

alliance between colonialism and patriarchy also comes into play in their lives, albeit to different degrees. Reading these texts grants us a deeper understanding of the experience of cultural displacement, racism, and gender discrimination through a female and often marginalized perspective while simultaneously shedding light on the reasons behind the persistence and perpetuation of severe forms of oppression. In addition to examining the complex dynamics of power, race and colonial history that shape the immigrant experience, the three writers emphasize the political importance of voice and perspective in reshaping dominant social relations. Their texts also challenge the notion of a pure British identity by reaffirming how the presence of these diasporic subjects has transformed such a notion, creating a new identity, which is hybrid, flexible and not fixed.

The protagonists' journeys of dislocation and search for belonging offer a critical perspective on their connection with their countries of origin, which changes along with their relationship with London. Hortense, Kehinde and Nazneen migrate for different reasons, thus having distinct expectations about the foreign land. Hortense moves to Britain motivated by ambitions and a desire to erase her Jamaican roots from her path. As she grew up with the romanticized image that her mother country is her place of belonging, she is determined to succeed there. Of the three protagonists, she is the only one who actually chooses to move to England. Kehinde and Nazneen, on the other hand, embark on their diasporic journeys compelled by marital bonds. They both remain connected to the culture and traditions of their homelands until their expectations or idealized images are deconstructed. When this happens, it is either because of their frustration upon the experience of returning to their homeland or the realization that their home is in the diasporic destination and returning is not an option anymore.

The exclusionary aspect of big, cosmopolitan and global cities, like London, has been the topic of extensive debates in social, economic and political spheres. Due to its long history of migration, the city has been the stage for numerous approaches to the integration or exclusion of its immigrants. Such a controversial position is part of the three stories. The changing aspect of London, not only in its physical traits but also in social and political terms, is the background of the experiences of dislocation of Hortense, Kehinde and Nazneen. As each journey happens at different times in the 20th century, diverse aspects of the city are intertwined in each narrative. Thus, the reception of immigrants, their settlement, their alienation/adaptation and their treatment by society and the government vary accordingly in the three novels. In *Small Island*, Hortense finds a London that contrasts with what she had been taught to believe. Her romanticized idea of the city leads her to expect that she will be

welcomed with open arms because of her British educational background. But that doesn't happen; instead, she faces racism and discrimination for being a black woman from Jamaica. In *Kehinde*, the protagonist lives in London in two different moments. The first, spanning over almost two decades, involves a comfortable life, a steady job, a stable marriage and two young kids, who having been born there, are completely attuned to the British way of life. The second moment presents London influenced by a different political and social situation, with fewer opportunities for immigrants like her and a more racist environment. In *Brick Lane*, on the other hand, Nazneen regards London as a foreign land from the first day for years to come. Subjected to her husband's strict patriarchal control, she feels alien to the city due to its urban aspects, people, colours, and architecture. The lack of knowledge of the English language isolates her even more. Confined at home, the domestic space eventually becomes her place of awakening and empowerment. Only when she gains autonomy over her life, does she claim her place in the city. In her article about *Small Island*, scholar Maria Helena Lima argues that: "Although the presence of Caribbean peoples, Asians and Africans in the metropolis changes its politics, its intellectual traditions and cultural ideologies, at the same time, that presence has not been sufficiently represented, not to mention validated" (LIMA, 2005, p. 59). The analysis made in this dissertation has shown how the city of London has its contours and colours changed by the presence of the diasporic characters. It is a two-way process of estrangement, negotiation, and transformation.

The reasons for the characters' struggles in the diasporic land are different but equally challenging. Racism is a major issue for Hortense and for Kehinde when she moves to London for the second time. Nazneen, on the other hand, is affected by xenophobia and religious and cultural stereotyping. What is unquestionable is that they all face gender discrimination. Their relationship with the male characters (husbands, lovers or sons) is also crucial in confronting power relations and asserting their right to alter the course of their lives. While Hortense finds a partner in Gilbert to build a home in London as her husband, Kehinde and Nazneen end up choosing to live a romantic story in the diaspora (Kehinde) or to move forward alone with her best friend and daughters (Nazneen). Another theme that prevails in their stories is that of female solidarity. The help of their women friends, regardless of their cultural background, is fundamental to their journeys of self-empowerment. *Small Island*, *Kehinde* and *Brick Lane* highlight the importance of sisterhood, friendship, and collaboration among women as a means of empowerment and resistance. The characters strive to assert their agency in a discriminatory environment through their collective efforts.

I hope my research can contribute to the literary field by asserting the valuable role of these writers and their oeuvre in offering a captivating blend of historical and cultural facts that are skilfully intertwined in their fictional accounts. In "British Black and Asian Writing since 1980" (2016), Chris Weedon points out that between 1980 and 2010, British Black and Asian writers of poetry, prose, autobiography and drama have responded to invisibility, tackled stereotypes, questioned simplistic perceptions of ethnic and religious communities in Britain, engaged with urgent issues, and created a more comprehensive cultural narrative of post-war Britain. The body of work analysed in this dissertation undoubtedly shares the aforementioned aspects. By exposing the impact of the protagonists' dislocations on their sense of belonging, these narratives challenge the limits of geographical affiliation and emphasize movement, instability, and the transformative journey of self-discovery as their central themes. Hortense, Kehinde and Nazneen go through instances of displacement, estrangement, alienation, frustration, transformation, empowerment and healing. I see their moment of healing as their moment of self-awareness, acceptance of their hybrid identity, and consequent in-betweenness. Besides, the aspirations and challenges of these characters can be those of many women.

The effects of colonization cannot be reversed, annulled, or cancelled. But its discourse can be reinterpreted, confronted, and rewritten from other perspectives. Levy, Emecheta and Ali share the engagement to present women protagonists who navigate their cultural heritage alongside the relationship with the diasporic space. Their experiences of displacement and its consequences open up space for a renegotiation of gender relations and a redefinition of the notion of home. Beyond their aesthetic value, the construction of the plot itself, the narrative strategies employed, and the diversity in language, these novels reaffirm the role of literature as an agent of cultural and social change. The different pathways followed by each protagonist converge into a space of contestation and disruption, which questions and subverts other modes of literary representation while exposing contemporary Britain's many facets and faces.

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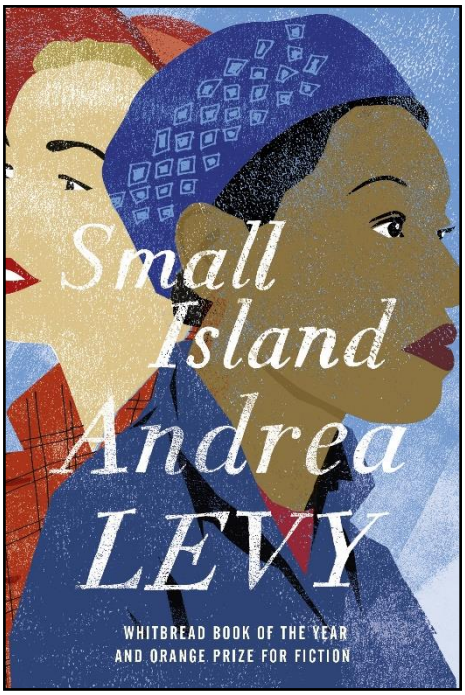
**APPENDIX** – Images

Image 1 – Small Island.




Fonte: LEVY, 2004b.

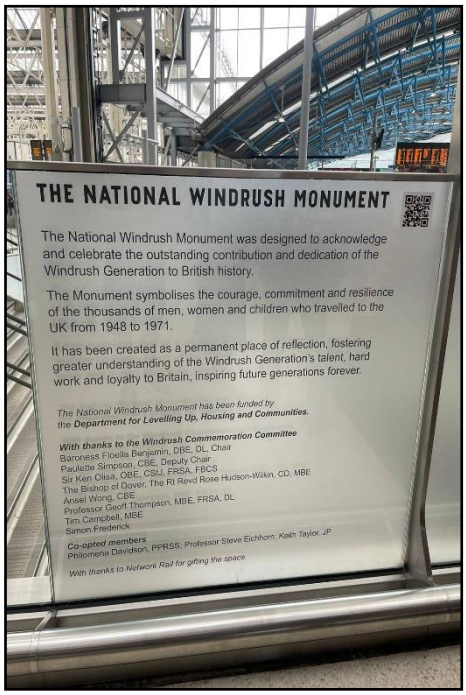
Image 2 – Andrea Levy.

Fonte: ANDREA..., 2007.

Image 3 – Monument in Waterloo Station.

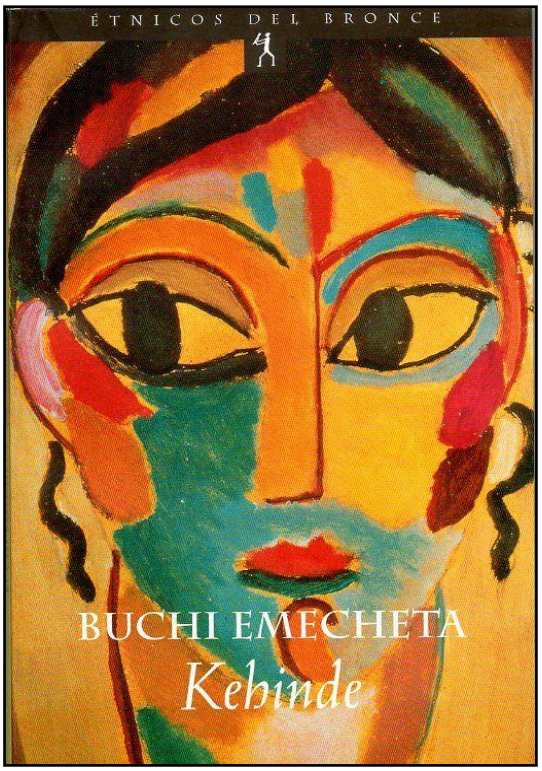
Fonte: NATIONAL..., 2022.

Image 4 – Windrush Monument.




Fonte: Author's collection, 2022.

Image 5 – Kehinde.




Fonte: EMECHETA, 1996.

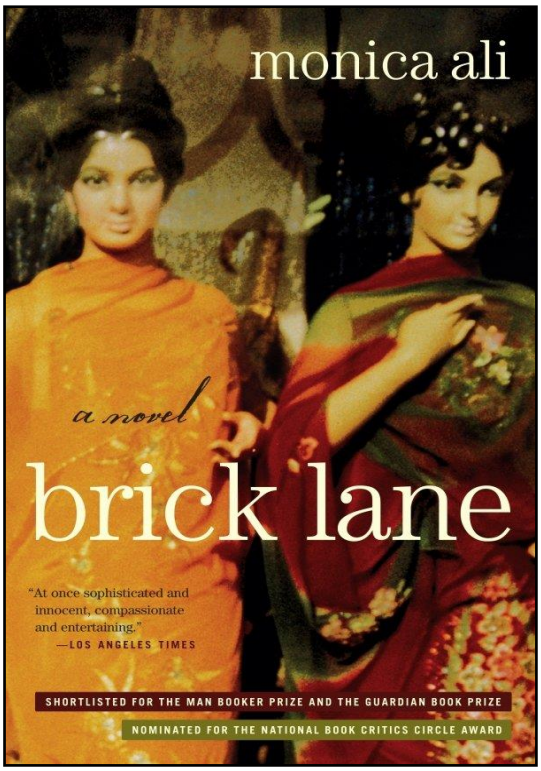
Image 6 – Buchi Emecheta.

Fonte: SULLIVAN, 2010.

Image 7 – “Little Lagos” in Peckham.


Fonte: FATUNLA, 2019.

Image 8 – Brick Lane.




Fonte: ALI, 2004.

Image 9 – Monica Ali.

Fonte: MONICA..., 2020.

Image 10 – Brick Lane E.I.


Fonte: BELL, 2021.