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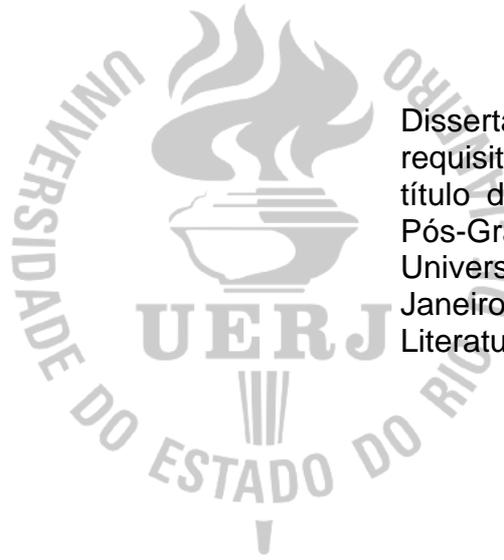
Julia Goulart Sereno

**Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*: A tale of two cities, or How Nazneen left
her fate**

Rio de Janeiro
2011

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Dissertação apresentada, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de Concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.

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Assinatura

Data

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RESUMO

SERENO, Julia Goulart. *Monica Ali's Brick Lane: A tale of two cities or How Nazneen left her fate* 2011. 81f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2011.

O objetivo desta dissertação é analisar o romance *Brick Lane* (2003), da escritora Monica Ali, focalizando o processo de empoderamento da protagonista Nazneen. Usando os conceitos de lugar e não-lugar propostos por Marc Augé, pretendo examinar passagens do romance que caracterizem a sensação de não-pertencimento vivida pela personagem. Nazneen recorre às memórias de sua infância com a irmã Hasina em Bangladesh para tentar se distanciar do espaço físico de Brick Lane (a comunidade onde reside em Londres), que se constitui em um “não-lugar”, pois ali não é possível reconstruir sua identidade fragmentada pelo deslocamento de uma cultura para outra. Considerando aspectos históricos e culturais de Bangladesh, terra natal de Nazneen, este trabalho pretende discutir as experiências da protagonista e de outros sujeitos diaspóricos do romance, além de analisar o papel crucial que Hasina (e suas cartas) desempenham na narrativa. O atual contexto multicultural e cosmopolita da cidade de Londres também será investigado, com a discussão de situações que afetam os imigrantes e suas representações no romance. Esta dissertação também considera o caráter gendrado dos movimentos migratórios contemporâneos que possibilitam novas perspectivas acerca das consequências da diáspora. A análise de passagens selecionadas do romance ratifica o processo gradual de autonomia de Nazneen que, por fim, consegue se sentir “em casa” novamente.

Palavras-chave: Diáspora. Memória. Lar. Lugar. Não-lugar. Pertencimento. Gênero.

ABSTRACT

The objective of this dissertation is to analyze the novel *Brick Lane* (2003), by Monica Ali, focusing on the process of empowerment of the protagonist Nazneen. By making use of the concepts of place and non-place proposed by Marc Augé, I intend to examine passages from the novel that characterize the feeling of not-belonging experienced by the character. Nazneen resorts to the memories of her childhood with her sister Hasina in Bangladesh in order to escape the physical space of Brick Lane, which is a 'non-place' for Nazneen, who is unable to reconstruct her identity fragmented in the process of dislocation from one culture to another. Considering the historical and cultural aspects of Bangladesh, Nazneen's homeland, this work intends to discuss the experiences of the protagonist and other diasporic subjects in the novel as well as to analyze the crucial role played by Hasina (and her letters) in the narrative. The present multicultural and cosmopolitan context of London will also be investigated, with a discussion of real situations affecting immigrants and their representations in the novel. This dissertation also considers the gendered nature of contemporary migratory movements which offer new perspectives on the consequences of diaspora. I will also analyze selected passages from the novel that highlight the gradual process of autonomy experienced by Nazneen who, eventually, feels "at home" again.

Key-words: Diaspora. Memor. Home. Places. Non-places. Belonging. Gender.

SINOPSE

Estudo sobre deslocamento e empoderamento no romance *Brick Lane* da escritora Mônica Ali. Investigação das múltiplas experiências da diáspora, com foco no papel do sujeito feminino e sua representação na literatura pós-colonial. Análise baseada em estudos pós-coloniais, feministas e teorias sobre o cosmopolitismo.

SINOPSYS

Discussion about dislocation and empowerment in *Brick Lane*, a novel written by Monica Ali. Investigation of the multiple diasporic experiences, focusing on the role of the female subject and its representation in the post-colonial literature. Analysis based on post-colonial and feminist studies and cosmopolitan theories.

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PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS: A PLACE CALLED BRICK LANE

The initial idea for my dissertation came up three years ago during the *Curso de Especialização in Literatures of the English Language* at UERJ. At the time, I was taking the course “Contemporary Voices in North-American Literature” with professor Luiz Manoel da Silva Oliveira and at the end of the semester I decided to write a paper, focusing on the experiences of the protagonist of *Jasmine*, a novel by Bharati Mukherjee published in 1989. In *Jasmine*, Jyoti is an Indian girl who is eager to escape the predictions made by an astrologer, but she is taught to accept fate as the main ruler of her life. Living under patriarchal rules and expected to keep traditions and values of her homeland even after she migrates to the United States, Jyoti gradually struggles for self-empowerment. Throughout Jyoti’s journey, since her youth in the village of Hasnapur until her life in Iowa, the character’s identity, along with her name, changes continuously. Jyoti, Jasmine, Kali, Jazzy, Jase and Jane are all personas who are exposed as “other lives” of the same woman. As time goes by, she manages to subvert and transgress traditional principles that are part of her Hindu culture. My interest in diasporic women characters continued as I planned to start the Master’s course in Literatures of English Language the following year.

The decision to write about *Brick Lane* stemmed from my watching the film version of the novel during the *Festival do Rio 2008*. The plot caught my attention, as it focused on the story of a young woman from a village in Bangladesh who migrates to London after an arranged marriage. “Brick Lane”, directed by Sarah Gravon and based on the novel of the same title written by Monica Ali and published in 2003, offers a very sensitive approach to issues of cultural differences as well as to the role of diasporic women in the globalized world. The opening scene in the film shows two girls running across a rice pad against an overwhelmingly colorful background where different shades of green and blue predominate. Such a setting becomes emblematic not only of the childhood memories of the two sisters but also of the strong bond connecting them in spite of the distance and time. Conversely, the film director Sarah Gravon explores the confining reality of the protagonist who lives in a small, cluttered apartment in the borough of Tower Hamlets, located in East London. While Nazneen is trapped in the role of a housewife who rarely leaves the place, her memories and dreams are filled with the images of her childhood in a village in rural Bangladesh. In the DVD version of the movie, the additional material included commentaries by

Gravon who explains that, in order to capture the essence of the text, she had to make tough choices when considering which aspects of the novel to be explored on the screen. Thus, in her first full-length film, she opted for Nazneen's childhood and adolescence with her sister Hasina until Nazneen leaves Bangladesh in order to get married. Then, the focus shifts to Nazneen's life in London already in 2001. In the film, Nazneen speaks very little; the camera grasps the many silent looks she gives whether to express what she is feeling or to react to other people's words. Sara Gravon also states that the idea of the film is to see the world through Nazneen's eyes rather than to create a representation of a Bangladeshi community. The "emotional truth" of Nazneen's journey is what Gravon strove to capture.

What most impressed me about the film was the intersection of serious and contemporary issues, such as religious discrimination and racial prejudice with the personal conflicts and achievements of the fictional Bangladeshi immigrant Nazneen, who feels lost and isolated in London, even though she lives among other immigrants from Bangladesh. Surely, the love triangle involving Nazneen, her husband Chanu and her lover Karim is kept on the foreground, probably aiming at attracting movie-goers who crave for love entanglements. Still, the film aroused my curiosity, so I decided to read the book and hopefully find out more about the other characters and their stories. I ordered the novel from a bookstore in England and once it arrived I could not put the book down.

Brick Lane is the first novel written by Monica Ali, who was hailed by the press and named by Granta magazine, which publishes the works of emerging writers, as one of the twenty best young British novelists in 2003.¹ *Brick Lane* was at or near the top of UK bestseller lists for most part of the summer of that year.²

The novel provides a literary representation of common hardships and challenges faced by those who are forced to or "choose" to leave their countries to live in London, the former colonizer's land. The exposure of the patriarchal structure Muslim women still have to face inside and outside their countries of origin also figures in the story as well as the violent acts committed against women today.

The focus of the novel, though, is on two women characters - Nazneen and Hasina – sisters who maintain a strong link with each other and their childhood as they exchange letters over the decades. Their stories are intertwined with what

¹ <http://www.granta.com/Magazine/81>. Access on February 11th, 2011.

² <http://bostonreview.net/BR28.6/chakrabarti.html> Access on February 11th, 2011

happens in the lives of different immigrants from Bangladesh, living in the existing community of Tower Hamlets, and to a lesser extent in the lives of those who stay in their home country. *Brick Lane* highlights the many facets of an immigrant's experience and challenges our stereotyped notions about different cultures.

The structure of the novel does not follow a linear pattern. The narrative starts in 1967, with a third person narrator telling the story of Nazneen's birth in Bangladesh (at the time still East Pakistan), but it contains a reference to a distant future, an anticipation of Nazneen's 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, 2003, p. 6).

In the same chapter we are taken to the year of 1985. Nazneen is recently married and living in the community of Tower Hamlets in London with her husband. However, the chronology is constantly broken as Nazneen falls asleep and dreams of her past life, or interrupted as the flow of Nazneen's consciousness temporarily takes her to a different place or point in time. For instance, while reciting a passage from the Qur'an, which usually helps her feel at ease, Nazneen falls asleep on the sofa and dreams of Gouripur and Hasina. Nazneen's dream is described in one paragraph. Then, the narrative is again focused on the present time in London, when she wakes up from the dream and rushes to prepare the evening meal. In the same chapter, the flow of the narrative is interrupted again when Nazneen is cooking dinner. She accidentally cuts her finger and while washing off the blood, her thoughts again drift away from the present moment. In a flashback, Nazneen recollects Chanu's words describing her to someone over the phone. Then, the narrative shifts again to Nazneen cooking in the kitchen: "The bleeding seemed to have stopped. Nazneen turned off the tap and wrapped a piece of kitchen roll around her finger. Who had Chanu been talking that day? Perhaps it was a call from Bangladesh, a relative who did not come to the wedding." (ALI, 2003, p. 15). This fragmented narrative is constant throughout the novel; Nazneen's story in London is often interrupted by her own dreams and childhood recollections. It seems that through this device, Ali explores the fragmented nature of the protagonist, who keeps revisiting past situations as an attempt to find harmony and to reflect on her condition.

The third-person narrative used in the novel is also interspersed with Hasina's letters, which appear at irregular intervals and which often times lead Nazneen to daydream or dream about Bangladesh, revealing important details about her past.

After I finished reading *Brick Lane*, I came up with an idea for the dissertation project. The fragmented nature of the narrative together with the process of self-empowerment undergone by Nazneen reminded me of *Jasmine*, so I considered writing about the two novels. I was aware of the historical and cultural specificities which distinguished one novel from the other, not to mention the different strategies used by Bharati Mukherjee and Monica Ali as they created these two fictional worlds. Still, I believed that an analysis of the different processes of self-empowerment that each protagonist undertakes would provide me with a solid basis for a comparison between *Jasmine* and *Brick Lane*.

Eventually, during my first year in the Master's program, I decided to focus only on *Brick Lane*, for I came to the conclusion that Monica Ali's novel offers a wide range of characters and situations that are essential for an in-depth analysis of the process of self-empowerment undergone by the protagonist. Unlike the movie, which shifts from Nazneen's adolescence to 2001, when her two daughters are already around 12 and 8 years old, the novel covers a wider span of time, basically from her arrival in London to marry Chanu through very difficult moments, such as the loss of her first baby son Raqib, which inevitably has a great influence on the way she tries to figure out her own life. Over the decades, in the premises of her apartment in London, Nazneen manages to find her voice, to see herself as a woman, more than wife and mother. She ends up by overcoming her strong feeling of displacement and her unquestioning submission to the stronghold of fate and patriarchal laws.

After the book was published in 2003, a very positive review of the novel, written by journalist Fareena Alam appeared in the British newspaper *The Guardian*.³ The journalist had been connected to the Bangladeshi culture because of her extended family but confessed that she did not know much about the living conditions of British Bengali immigrants in East London before reading *Brick Lane*. She claimed that the novel had enlightened her:

It celebrates the humanity and complexity of a community which even Bengalis like me know so little about; a community that has been pushed to the margins of

³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jul/13/fiction.features>. Access on February 8th, 2011.

Britain's ethnic mosaic, characterized by its many economic and social troubles, filed away under the convenient label of an ethnic problem.

She also pointed out that the reading of *Brick Lane* made readers aware of problems that at that point had not been addressed in the community, such as the emergence of gang violence and drug abuse, the latter usually thought of as a western issue. Hence, as the local government had not given enough support for the progress of these immigrants, a sense of community needed to be fostered as well as the exercise of citizenship:

... more and more are looking beyond their Bangladeshi roots to find an identity that merges Britishness and Bengaliness. It is this vision that I can relate to - and which means that today I can go to Brick Lane and find it easier to feel that I belong. Britain, after all, has become much more than just an economic halfway house for most Bengalis here. Home is here and now - Brick Lane, Green Street and Whitechapel.

Brick Lane's nomination for the National Book Critics Award and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and its acclamation as a best-seller contributed to build Monica Ali's literary reputation and apparently attracted the attention of the British movie industry. Nevertheless, some members of the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets were reportedly angry when the announcement of the upcoming shooting of the novel-based film in the region of Brick Lane was made. Apparently, those who protested against the book and the film felt offended with the novel's portrayal of the Bangladeshi immigrants living in London.

In a September 2007 edition of *The Guardian*, the director Sara Gravon comments on the decision made by the organizers of the Royal Film Performance - an annual charity event attended by members of the Royal family - to cancel the exhibition of "Brick Lane" in the occasion:

The cast and crew of the film were excited at the recognition for their work and are now understandably disappointed. The clear message from audiences once they have seen the film is that it is absolutely not disrespectful or controversial in any way. None of those elements cited by the minority of protesters during the production period appear in the film.⁴

In an interview published also in *The Guardian* in 2007, the author of the novel, Monica Ali, brought up important issues such as media distortion, creative writing, gender and nationalist offense.⁵ Regarding the press coverage about the

⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/sep/25/news>. Access on February 8th, 2011.

⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/oct/13/fiction.film>. Access on February 8th, 2011.

reactions of community leaders against the film adaptation of *Brick Lane* in July 2006, Ali states that much was done by journalists “to inflame the situation”. Threats of book burnings and large demonstrations had been announced by the media: however, as *The Guardian* reported afterwards, “the march drew no more than two women and 70 older men” and “many local residents seemed unaware of the campaign and had not seen the demonstration”.

Similar issues had been addressed in one of the discussions held in the event *Parallel lives: Cultural diversity and inequality in the urban space*, which took place at the 19th European Meeting of Cultural Journals in London in 2006. In the article entitled “A tale of two communities”, Indian writer and journalist Salil Tripathi draws attention to the need to abandon multiculturalist clichés about the Asian community in order to understand differences among communities. Tripathi describes what was happening in front of a government building in Brick Lane:

Their placards say that Monica Ali's novel, *Brick Lane*, which is being made into a film, is full of "lies", "slander", and "cynicism". When they are not offering blurb-length reviews of a book many of them have not read, they praise themselves as "hard-working" and "industrious". (...) In the end, they don't burn Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Other shopkeepers continue their business, some shaking their heads as the marchers walk down the lane, before retiring to Altab Ali Park, where several people speak simultaneously about how hurt they are; how Ali, who is only half-Bangladeshi and married to a "white man" and not from this area, does not portray a positive image of Bangladeshis; and while Ali may have the right to write, they too have the right to protest (Tripathi, 2007, p. 2).

In the interview Monica Ali also mentions that although the novel is not limited to her real experiences, her childhood perceptions played a significant role in her writing. Monica Ali was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh but was raised in England. Her father is Bangladeshi and her mother is English.

Why did I write about Nazneen? I think, but I cannot be sure, that the source was my mother, who is white and grew up in England. She made the opposite journey to Nazneen's, moving to Bangladesh (East Pakistan as it was then) to marry, knowing little of the culture and religion, speaking not a word of the language. When I was a child she often told me about that experience of utter social and cultural dislocation. I thought about it a lot.⁶

Another point raised by Ali in the interview has to do with the issue of gender. According to her, those who protested against the book do not accept the relevance of a story which is about feminine self-empowerment: “the fact that Nazneen, who has an arranged marriage to a much older man, embarks on an affair with a much

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/oct/13/fiction.film>. Access on February 8th, 2001.

younger man was considered a negative portrayal by a predictable few". Predictably enough, male "leaders" of the conservative Bangladeshi community of Tower Hamlets disliked the protagonist's journey towards independence.

Finally, Ali discusses the main source of anger among Bangladeshis: the words of Chanu when referring to immigrants from Bangladesh living in London. The character often says that they are "uneducated, illiterate, close-minded" (ALI, 2003, p. 21). As I will discuss later on, Chanu's opinions regarding other Bengali immigrants is very much influenced by the social class structure prevailing in Bangladesh while he was growing up. Also, Chanu's hopes and sense of self-importance will fade as his expectations are not met. What is more, Chanu's opinions do not necessarily represent the author's. He can not be seen as a spokesman for Monica Ali.

In "Migration, Identity, and Belonging in British Black and South Asian Women's Writing" (2008), Chris Weedon mentions the concept of "burden of representation" that was developed in the area of Black film studies. In the article "De Margin and de Centre" (1988) Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer draw attention to the representative roles and discourses that are part of Black culture forms, for example, as a way to achieve social and economic equality and build a positive image. Two types of racial representation are suggested by the authors; one takes into account the power of authenticity and the idea that culture must be considered a social practice, for it should describe what happens in real life. The second type deals with the delegating character of representation, which means taking responsibility for a community if you want to speak for them (JULIEN & MERCER, 1988, p. 4). If we consider the offended members of the Bengali community in Brick Lane who reported they were misrepresented in Ali's fictional account, we might as well ask to what extent this "misrepresentation" is related to the fact that they don't think that Monica Ali is authorized to write about them. They might argue that as she does not live in Bangladesh or in the Bengali enclave in London, she does not have the right to write about their experiences. I find appropriate to quote Monica Ali at this point: "To see through another's eyes, to take another perspective, and to take the reader along on that journey, goes to the very purpose, the moral heart of the work. It is the reason why I write". In another interview given to British novelist Diran Adebayo (2004), Monica Ali had justified her choice to focus on the disadvantaged aspect of minority communities: "What's interesting to me is that people are prepared to see this other

side of Britain and recognize that it is a world apart but it's part of what makes England now." (NASTA, 2004, p.350-351).

Undoubtedly, Monica Ali gives voice to the marginalized section of Bangladeshi immigrants in London. By so doing, she represents a social-ideological identity of a group that might not correspond to their view of themselves. In the present work, I recognize that *Brick Lane* is, above all, a work of fiction. The social-ideological representation of members of a Bangladeshi community in the novel is not an indisputable truth, but just another ideology. As such, it is not free of prejudices and/or misconceptions. It is worth quoting Nick Bentley here on the matter of representation in fiction:

If writers were not allowed to use their imagination to empathize with characters from a different class, gender or cultural background, then novels would be limited to a series of semi-autobiographical, first-person narratives. Once a novel is published, however, the reading public has the right to challenge the way in which that fiction might impact on the cultural reception of the communities it represents (BENTLEY, 2008, p. 84).

Jonathan Culler's notion of the construction of meaning of literary texts (1999) also seems useful here. According to the author, the meaning of literary texts is simultaneously the product of a reader's experience and a property of a text. So, one cannot reduce the meaning of a text to what the author had in mind or to something immanent to it. Neither can one maintain that the reader is solely responsible for the building of meaning of a text, thus disregarding the text completely (CULLER, 1999, p. 69). That is precisely the view of meaning that I adopt in the present work, as something dynamic, i.e., the product of negotiations between the reader and the text.

I aim at relating the literary creation process with the historical context of both Dhaka and London, which form a background to the story. I find it important to mention some aspects of the historical and cultural backgrounds of Nazneen's homeland so as to discuss the experiences not only of the protagonist and other diasporic characters but also of Hasina, who remains in Bangladesh.

Since most characters in *Brick Lane* are from Bangladesh or at least are connected to it through family ties, I will briefly explore the historical and social context of that nation-state, drawing on information provided by the book *A History of Bangladesh* (2009), by Willem Van Schendel, and the online reference resource produced by the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency of the US) called *CIA World*

Factbook, which is updated weekly and often used a resource for academic research papers.

Willem Van Schendel is Professor of Modern Asian History at the University of Amsterdam and has published other two books about Bangladesh: *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (2005) and *Global Blue: Indigo and Espionage in Colonial Bengal* (2006). I decided to use *A History of Bangladesh* due to its comprehensive approach to the history of the country and the didactic nature of Schendel's text, which helped me understand the countries and contradictions of the place. On the CIA's website I found detailed summaries of Bangladesh's current government, demographics and economy.

In the first chapter of this dissertation "Bangladesh: past and present fact; and fiction", I will cover the country's history of colonization (including the Partition of India), its process of independence and its current political and economic situation. The last section of the chapter will deal with the literary representation of contemporary Bangladesh through Hasina's letters, which disclose not only details of her life but also the vulnerability of women in face of patriarchal oppression.

The second chapter "Postcolonialism, feminism, cosmopolitanism" covers the theoretical basis of my work, which deals with postcolonialism, through the writings of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said and Stuart Hall, and those of the feminists Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak and Ann Brooks. In the section "The new diasporas", I will discuss the complex feature of recent migratory movements in the context of globalization. Drawing upon the works of James Clifford, Jana Braziel, Anita Mannur, Avtar Brah and Yasmin Hussain, I will bring into discussion issues such as gender relations, hybrid identities and discrimination against ethnic minority communities. I will also analyze specific passages and comment upon incidents from *Brick Lane* in order to determine how these issues are incorporated in the novel. After that, I will focus on the context of diversity and multiculturalism of contemporary London as it is explored in *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the metropolis* (2004) by John McLeod. Again, selected passages from the novel will be used to highlight some of the possible difficulties experienced by South Asian immigrants living in London and the rising discrimination against them after the terrorist attacks of September 11th. In "Women and the new cosmopolitanism", I will discuss the issue of gender in the current context of globalization, pointing out the feminization of migration and the

participation of women in the system of labor exploitation, which is discussed in the works of Josna Rege, Gayatri Spivak and Avtar Brah.

In chapter three "Nazneen's journeys" I will dwell on the flashbacks and dreams of Nazneen, considering the concepts of spaces, places and non-places proposed by anthropologist Marc Augé in *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1994), which is mentioned by philosopher Zygmunt Bauman in *Liquid Modernity* (2000). The notion of home will also be explored, taking into account the definitions given by Avtar Brah in the context of the diaspora. In the same chapter, I will discuss the protagonist's strategy of dislocation through her flashbacks and dreams that take her back to the village and the sister she left behind. Thus, I have selected passages of *Brick Lane* in which it is possible to relate the concepts abovementioned to the character's feeling of displacement. Besides, the process of Nazneen's coming to terms with her fate and her subjectivity is also developed by analyzing excerpts from the novel, which indicate her gradual empowerment and autonomy.

1. BANGLADESH: PAST AND PRESENT; FACT AND FICTION

The history of Bangladesh is a history of frontiers. From the earliest times the Bengal delta has been a meeting ground of opposites, and it is these encounters, clashes and accommodations that have given Bangladesh its distinct character.

Willem Van Schendel

I out from favor at factory. One week past they shunned me. I go to sit with the others for lunch time they make silence. I sitting apart and only look at chapati. They put hands up and whisper. I am not looking still I see. I sit near the tap.

Monica Ali

1.1 A history of colonization

Bangladesh is primarily a rural country, with most people living outside of the urban areas. Mainly bordered by India, it has one of the biggest Muslim populations in the world, according to statistics provided in 2008 by the CIA's *World's Factbook*⁷. Its long history of colonization, poverty and natural disasters has definitely had a great impact on its current situation.

In *A History of Bangladesh* (2009), Professor Willem Van Schendel writes about the major historical events leading to the creation of Bangladesh, namely, the Mughal colonization, the British colonization of the Bengali region, the Partition of India, the war with Pakistan, and the process of independence of Bangladesh, which resulted in the emergence of Bangladesh as a nation-state.

Schendel affirms that the British colonial rule in South Asia started in 1757 with the Battle of Polashi and lasted until 1947. Still, some Bangladesh historians claim that colonial rule was not over when the British went away in 1947. They argue that the post-1947 state of Pakistan was another form of foreign colonialism and that the country has lived a period of neo-colonial domination since 1971. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 49).

Unlike the Mughals, descendants of the Mongols who brought Islamism to India and were the first rulers over the Bengal delta, the British were interested not

⁷ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>. Access on February 4th, 2011.

only in extracting Bengal's riches but also in conquering the rest of India and other parts of Asia. The British victory in the aforementioned battle meant "the beginning of European domination, new forms of capitalist exploitation, a racially ordered society and profound cultural change" (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 56). Schendel points out some of the most significant actions taken under the British rule that definitely helped shape postcolonial Bangladesh. To begin with, the British established a new system of land taxation, known as permanent settlement, which was a deal made by the British and the local tax-collectors, the zamindars. Such agreement turned the zamindars into landowners, who had to pay fixed taxes to the government as a way to prevent their land from being auctioned off (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 58), thus generating a steady income for the British colonizers. Another important decision was the introduction of large-scale export-oriented cash-cropping, which created new ties between Bengal's rural economy and European and Asian markets. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 60). That type of production also led to particular forms of social organizations and land control (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 63). Changes were also made in law and property rights and in cultural standards. Persian ceased to be the state's official language as English-language schools and colleges prepared part of the Bengali elite for jobs in the colonial system. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 64). The establishment of two modern universities in Kolkata and Dhaka were visible signs of the colonial framework. The implantation of the British educational system helped to perpetuate the influence of the British culture upon the colonized and also to establish a system of government in which the British colonies dealt more directly with the Bengali elite who, in turn, was responsible for controlling the merchant and lower classes.

It is worth mentioning that at the end of the British colonial rule most Bengalis were still living in the countryside and involved in agriculture. Nevertheless, as the extension of cultivation reached its limits at the end of the nineteenth century, farmers decided to migrate, going mainly to western and northern Bangladesh, where they could still find some land (p. 68). Besides, cultivators started reproducing at a high rate so as to increase household income. Yet, the acceleration of the growth rate has proved to be a drawback for the country. Nowadays, Bangladesh is the seventh most populous nation in the world, although it is crammed in a very small area. Schendel writes:

Rural crowding became a problem because agricultural productivity did not increase to keep up with it. On the contrary, from the turn of the twentieth century per capita output declined. As rural prosperity diminished, life became less secure for many and poverty increased noticeably. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 72).

During World War II, a severe famine hit Bengal caused by a collapse of the grain-marketing system. As a preventive measure against a Japanese invasion, the British moved 150,000 people away from their lands “to make room for hastily constructed airships and army camps.” To make matters worse, a cyclone hit western districts of Bengal in 1942, killing 14,000 people and devastating the ripening rice crop. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 75-76).

The last decades of colonial rule were characterized by disorder as civil disobedience campaigns were made by nationalists who wanted the British to leave India. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 79). As a way to stop the strong anti-colonial movement that was happening in Bengal, the British decided to divide the province into a western and eastern part in 1905. Such division allowed the emergence of a rivalry between Muslims and Hindus, which has affected the political situation of the country ever since (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 80). In 1911, the 1905 division of Bengal, which had not accomplished a separation of Bengalis on regional terms, was annulled by the British. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 86).

Some time later, in the late 1930's, a territorial division between Muslim zones and other parts of the country had already been discussed by several politicians and intellectuals in India:

The movement of a Muslim homeland started from the assertion that Muslims were not merely a community within the Indian nation but a separate nation with a right of self-determination. [...] The homeland for Indian Muslims came to be referred to as 'Pakistan'. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 88-89).

Several rural confrontations affected the economic structure that had supported colonial rule and, inevitably, reinforced the differences between Hindu and Muslims identities. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 93).

1.2 The Partition

As the World War II came to an end, changes in politics in Britain resulted in the end of the British Empire in India. Thus, Bengal's partition was claimed by the

national Congress Party leadership: in 1947, the western part joined India and the eastern part joined Pakistan. Schendel provides details: "Pakistan's territory was augmented by the addition of most of Sylhet, a district that had been administered as part of Assam. The combined territory was generally referred to as East Pakistan." (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 96).

In "New Migrations: Clashes, Connections and Diasporic women's writing" (2009), Susan Friedman makes reference to the Partition of India as a traumatic event that triggered violent fights among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. According to Friedman,

at least a million people died (the numbers vary), some 75,000 women are said to have been abducted and raped by men of different religions, and at least 12 million fled their homes to cross the newly constituted border into a diasporic existence in which the homeland was indeed forever lost by the continuing enmity between the two nations. (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p. 12).

The first chapter of *Brick Lane* provides the information that Nazneen was born in a small village located in the Mymensingh District in East Pakistan in 1967, that is, before Bangladesh became an independent nation-state.

In the chapter called "The Pakistan experiment", Schendel points out that the new Pakistani elite had to decide about the language to be used in the conduction of Pakistan's state business. When the plan to make Urdu the national language was suggested, representatives from East Pakistan rapidly reacted against it. Students who organized demonstrations were arrested and injured. East Pakistani intellectuals, civil servants, politicians and students were frustrated and disillusioned with the Muslim League government: "Urdu-speaking candidates were preferred for jobs in the state bureaucracy; in East Pakistan, this excluded almost all locals (fewer than 1 per cent spoke Urdu as a second language) and favored North Indian immigrants." (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 112). Consequently, in the elections of 1954, the ruling Muslim League was humiliated, winning only 7 seats out of 309: "the elections of 1954 were won by an alliance known as the United Front and its style of politics had dominated politics in the Bengal delta ever since." (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 116).

During the Pakistan rule, East Pakistan was mainly a rural society with most inhabitants dependent on agriculture. However, problems such as declining rural incomes and lack of investment in primary and secondary education were some of the failures of the Pakistan experiment. In 1961, 82 per cent of those who lived in East Pakistan were illiterate:

...primary education was poorly developed, especially in the rural areas, where four out of five villages had no primary schools and teachers were badly trained and paid. Drop-out rates were high: half of the children who attended school left before grade five and only one in five made it to secondary school. A parallel system of Islamic schools (*madrasa*) provided teaching in Arabic and Islamic studies. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 156).

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 young group of graduates emerged as the new elite of the country. In *Brick Lane*, Chanu, who is so proud of his diplomas and knowledge of English culture, apparently belonged to this group of selected people who had access to high education but could not make their living in their homeland. What Chanu did not foresee was that in spite of his English education, in Great Britain he would be considered a foreigner, perhaps a “Paki”, definitely an outsider.

1.3 Towards Independence

In 1970, the first general elections took place in Pakistan, electing the Awami League. With a strong mobilization made by the elite in the rural areas, demonstrations of love to the Bengal delta hoped to evoke a sense of nationalism and pride that were essential for a new future. But in 1971 an armed conflict commanded by the General Tikka Khan, known as the Butcher of Bengal, killed students and Awami League leaders, destroyed Bengali nationalist monuments, murdered Hindus and burned down villages. The extreme violence of the army attack, though, did not prevent popular resistance in the Bengal delta (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 162). As millions of refugees crossed the border into India, the Awami League regrouped there and officially proclaimed Bangladesh to be an independent nation- state in April 1971.⁸ However, in 1975, post-independent Bangladesh’s political future was uncertain. Major-General Ziaur Rahman became the ruler and the country remained under military control until 1990, when a widespread campaign

⁸ Although in *Brick Lane* Monica Ali does not make any clear distinction between the uses of the adjectives Bengali or Bangladeshi to characterize the people from Bangladesh, it is important to point out the political difference between the two of them. Schendel (2009) explains that while Bengali nationalism emerged during the Language movement of 1952 and had its climax in the War of Liberation in 1971, Bangladeshi nationalism has its roots in the regime of military dictatorship which rejected Bengali traditions and encouraged the acceptance of Islamic values and principles.

managed to remove the military force and reestablish a parliamentary democracy. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 197).

1.4 Bangladesh today

In 2008, after years of strikes and violent rallies, peaceful parliamentary elections were finally held in Bangladesh and Sheikh Hasina Wajed was elected prime minister. According to the CIA *World's FactBook*⁹, Bangladesh remains a poor and overpopulated country and is a transit country for men, women, and children trafficked for the purposes of forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation. About forty-five per cent of Bangladeshis are employed in the agriculture sector, with rice as the single-most-important product. Every year, during the monsoon rainy season, about a third of the country is hit by floods, which hinders its economic development. According to Schendel,

experts on climate change predict that Bangladesh will be one of the countries most severely affected by rising sea levels resulting from global warming. On the other hand, in a world increasingly concerned about water scarcities Bangladesh's abundance of fresh water could be turned into a critical resource. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p.10).

The issue of migration is presented by Willem Schendel as a long-term practice in the Bengal delta. He mentions three different types of migration: overseas labor migration, middle-class educational and job migration and unauthorized labor migration to India. I reckon the two first types are the most relevant to my dissertation as they involve the establishment of communities in big cities, such as London, and the sending of middle-class children to study in learning centers like Britain and the US.

Sailors from Bangladesh had been employed on British ships for centuries, and from the eighteenth century stranded sailors had formed communities in port cities such as London and New York. [...] From the early 1960s, thousands of men went to industrial towns all over Britain to work in factories. They returned home with success stories, thereby prompting further migration. As Britain tightened its immigration laws, however, it became more difficult to travel back and forth, and Sylheti laborers settled permanently in Britain. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 235).

It is estimated that nearly half a million Bangladeshis reside in the United Kingdom today, mainly in East London boroughs. Except for a minority from

⁹ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>. Access on February 4th, 2011.

educated middle classes with good English language skills, most migrants have come from rural backgrounds.

After 1971, as agriculture did not provide enough job opportunities, those who had not migrated to another country started to move to the urban centers in Bangladesh in order to find employment. Low-skilled men would work with transport or informal trade whereas low-skilled women worked in the garment industry (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 237). Although working conditions in these factories are shocking in terms of working hours, health risks, security and child labor, women still look for this kind of job. Another option is domestic work which offers even lower wages. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 238). The rapid growth of the cities, such as Dhaka, is another factor mentioned by Schendel. Air pollution, traffic jams and power cuts are some of the troubles caused by the cities' unplanned expansion:

Today Dhaka is struggling to keep up its electricity and water supply and still lacks an adequate system of public transport. Although efforts are being made to fight extreme air pollution, Dhaka regularly shows up on lists of the world's most polluted cities. (SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 239).

1.5 Contemporary Dhaka – through Hasina's eyes

In *Brick Lane*, as Hasina writes Nazneen about her experiences, the reader becomes acquainted with the experiences of women in Dhaka who work in textile factories and as domestic servants;

I tell you about garment factory. Only half hour walk from here and it fine place. Eight o'clock is the start time. All must come few minute before and eight o'clock exact they unlock gate. If you come late it is trouble because they lock the gates after to keep safe (ALI, 2003, p. 156).

In "Acknowledgments", which appear after the closing of the novel, Monica Ali expresses gratitude to Naila Kabeer's *The Power to Choose* (2000) - a study of the experiences of Bangladeshi women working in the garment industry in London and in Dhaka – and claims to have used the book as a source of inspiration. According to Michael Perfect in "The Multicultural Bildungsroman: Stereotypes in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*" (2008), Kabeer's study is largely based on testimonies provided by the workers themselves (PERFECT, 2008, p.116). He argues that a comparison between

some lines from Hasina's letters and testimonies presented in Kabeer's book will reveal the imitative nature of Ali's work, but he defends the novelist:

That Ali so obviously bases Hasina – her general and more specific circumstances, as well as her attitudes and beliefs – on the testimonies recorded in *The Power to Choose* is perhaps indicative of an attempt to make her an “authentic” character, and might seem to a means of debunking accusations of the novel simply propagating stereotypes. (PERFECT, 2008, p. 118).

In my opinion, by considering the mimetic strategy abovementioned, it is possible to see Ali's use of Kabeer's book – which she openly acknowledges as discussed above - as a positive feature since it contributes to a more realistic approach in Ali's creation of Hasina. In fact, it is through Hasina that the novelist gives voice to characters who are still subjected to patriarchal rules in Bangladesh and who run the risk of becoming targets of violence, including disfigurement with acid.¹⁰

In one of Hasina's letters to Nazneen, she tells the story of her friend Monju and her baby, who are victims of acid attack by her own husband: “I tell you about friend Monju. Acid melt cheekbone and nose and one eye. Other eye damage only with pain and very hate. Difficult thing how I make you describe? Is worse see this good eye. Is where hope should be but no hope is there.” (ALI, 2003, p. 415).

It is worth noticing that the letters – a personal means of communication – are the only vehicle available to Hasina, which enable her, albeit in limited circumstances, to be the subject of her own story, to write instead of being written in the text.

Critic Chris Weedon includes letters among the effective modes for exploring patriarchal relations and articulating questions of women's subjectivity. (WEEDON, 2008, p. 19). In *O Migrante na Rede do Outro* (1999), psychiatrist and professor Ademir Pacelli Ferreira makes reference to works of cinema and literature so as to examine the various processes of madness experienced by immigrants who come from the northeast region of Brazil to live and work in the south part of the country. In the section “Narrativa Epistolar: Reconstrução da Intersubjetividade Migrante” Ferreira observes that the act of writing letters is an effective method used by many

¹⁰ According to information found on the official site <http://www.acidsurvivors.org/> in January 2011, in most instances victims have acid thrown in their faces either because they have spurned sexual advances of a male or rejected a marriage proposal. Besides serious physical damage, victims face social isolation, unemployment and discrimination.

immigrants to maintain their bond with those who stayed in their home town. According to the author, besides sharing feelings of affection and anxiety, the letters exchanged also establish a relationship of intimacy and complicity between those who left and those who stayed behind. The letters “make present” to the migrating subject those who are absent. (FERREIRA, 1999, p. 87- 88).

In *Brick Lane*, the letters also confirm that Hasina is a crucial character in the development of her sister’s story. After Nazneen’s first son dies when he is still a baby, the narrative is focused only on Hasina’s letters, as if Nazneen’s voice was silenced. Thus, in chapter seven, we get to know about Nazneen solely through the words of her sister, with the letters covering a period of thirteen years, during which the two sisters share deep feelings about their lives even though the narrative is focused only on Hasina’s letters from Bangladesh.

My view is that through the voice of Nazneen’s sister, Monica Ali exposes complex aspects of life in Bangladesh. Issues such as environmental pollution, child labor, HIV and domestic violence are mentioned by Hasina when telling Nazneen stories about herself or about those who work with her. Hasina’s struggle to overcome the hardships she encounters in the patriarchal society of Bangladesh is complementary to Nazneen’s lack of autonomy in London. Hasina’s character is built up through her words in broken English, which reveal her subjectivity and expose her reality. Since Nazneen and Hasina grew up together in Bangladesh, one might expect the letters to be written in Bengali. In “The Multicultural Bildungsroman: Stereotypes in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*” (2008), Michael Perfect suggests that the letters are freely translated from Bengali. According to him, the use of broken English is used as “a formal representation of the vulnerability and helplessness that characterize Hasina’s life in Bangladesh as well as those of other unfortunates around her.” (PERFECT, 2008, p. 112). I agree that in order to be coherent with the character’s profile, the author chose Hasina’s letters to be marked by fragmented syntax and inaccurate grammar. Such mistakes, though, do not prevent the narrative in the letters from being naïve and poetic at the same time.

1.6 Nazneen and Hasina – trapped in their own worlds

From the beginning of the narrative, it is already noticeable that both Nazneen and Hasina keep a very strong bond with each other. The letters that they exchange

are not only a symbol of their sisterhood but also a narrative strategy employed by Ali to present Hasina's story, establishing differences and similarities between their plight. At first, the contrast between the sisters' stories is inevitable. While Nazneen's everyday life is described to the reader, emphasizing the sameness of her daily routine of regular household chores and prayer, Hasina's letters evoke a life of drama and action, suggesting that she has autonomy to escape her Fate and decide the course of her life. As an obedient daughter, Nazneen accepted her arranged marriage and tried not to question her fate. But Hasina proved to be a rebel, who "kicked against fate" (ALI, 2003, p. 13) and ran away with the man she loved. The submissiveness which characterizes Nazneen's life contrasts with the apparent autonomy of her sister's. In the first letter sent by Hasina, Nazneen gets to know about the love marriage her sixteen-year-old sister made with Malek. In broken English, Hasina writes: "Even we have nothing I happy. We have love. Love is happiness" (ALI, 2003, p.17). Hasina is praying for a son and hopes that one day Malek's mother will forgive them for their sinful marriage. Although Nazneen is worried about Hasina's attitude towards fate, she also considers the possibility that Hasina is indeed following her fate, that running away with Malek was perhaps part of Hasina's fate. As Nazneen was taught that fate had the power to rule her life, she sees her sister's fortune as just another way to accept what cannot be changed. For Nazneen, the succeeding letters sent by Hasina are not only sources of information about her sister's life in Bangladesh but also stories that sound more interesting than her dull routine in London. Above all, they provide Nazneen with an escape route even if temporary from the place where she feels she doesn't belong to.

Gradually, however, Nazneen starts to realize that Hasina's life in Bangladesh is not easy or carefree and comes to the conclusion that "They were both lost in cities that would not pause even to shrug" (ALI, 2003, p. 55). As Yasmin Hussain states: "Both sisters initially are equally confined by their circumstances, by the traditions that silence women and constrict them within an oppressive system of honor and shame." (HUSSAIN, 2005, p. 96). In her letters, Hasina describes her husband as a good and very patient man. At first she blames herself when she is mistreated: "Sometime I make him lose patience without I mean to" (ALI, 2003, p. 42). After some time without sending any letters, Hasina writes explaining that she has left her husband and run away to Dhaka by herself, apparently tired of getting beaten:

In morning soon as husband go out for work I go away to Dhaka. Our landlady Mrs. Kashem is only person who know about it. She say it is not good decision but she help anyway. She say it is better get beaten by own husband than beaten by stranger. But those stranger not saying at same time they love me. If they beat they do in all honesty (ALI, 2003, p. 54).

Thus, Hasina realizes that endearing words lose their value accompanied by physical abuse. Nazneen does not get beaten by Chanu, but at the beginning she accepts when he beats his elder daughter Shahana if she disobeys or confronts him. She passively watches Chanu lose his patience and does nothing to defend Shahana from his physical aggressions: "Nazneen took the girls to their room. A redness circled Shahana's wrist. She pulled her arm away from her mother and sucked her lips inside her mouth, 'Time for bed', said Nazneen. She kissed Bibi and she tried to kiss Shahana" (ALI, 2003 p. 213). In this context, beating a wife or spanking a daughter is seen as a male prerogative, the female body subjected to patriarchal power.

Worried about her sister, alone in a big city, without friends and family, Nazneen asks Chanu to go to Bangladesh to find Hasina, but he refuses to do so. This is one of the many appeals Nazneen makes to Chanu on behalf of her sister, but which is denied by her husband.

After the death of Raqib, Nazneen's first born son, there is a period of thirteen years covered only by Hasina's letters. We do not hear Nazneen's voice anymore. It seems that she has been silenced by the death of her baby. Nazneen's story is no longer mediated by a narrator who foregrounds her point of view and the story of both sisters is told through Hasina's letters. In a letter from 1988, we get to know that Hasina has a job at a garment factory. After some time, Hasina says that some of her women co-workers at the factory are having trouble with religious fundamentalists who are against men and women working together. She also writes about a co-worker who was beaten by her own husband: "Aleyas husband give beating. Last month gone she best worker in factory and get bonus. They give a sari and for this sari she take beating" (ALI, 2003 p. 164). These incidents express particular aspects of the very strong patriarchal structure prevailing in the society in which Hasina lives. Women are oppressed by men at the workplace and inside their own homes. While working at the garment factory, Hasina rents a room from Mr. Chowdhury and she claims that her landlord is like a father to her. But one year later, Hasina becomes a victim of discrimination from her colleagues because of false rumors that she is

having an affair with her landlord. Later, because of another rumor, which is spread by one of her workmates, Hasina is accused of prostitution and is fired from the factory. This happens because her colleague Abdul usually walks her home after work and is kind to her in front of other women. When Hasina and Abdul are called to the manager's office, they are accused of damaging the reputation of the factory, but only Hasina loses her job. She is shocked to see that Abdul does nothing to save her job or to deny the rumors. On the contrary, he stands quietly and watches their boss offend and threaten Hasina:

“The boy admit to all”, he say. “Dont tell me your shameless lie. Go before I beat shame into you.” I look at Abdul but he not look at me. [...] He say nothing and I go out. I wait outside door for him also getting sack and walking home with me. Manager I hear him. “Pretty girl eh? You boys! Have to get a little practice in before marriage eh?” He laughing. Only him laughing not Abdul. (ALI, 2003, p.169).

In the novel, this blatant use of double standards for men and women provides yet another example of the strong patriarchal structure to which women are subjected to in Bangladesh. Although Abdul has claimed to be in love with Hasina, he does nothing to save her from the shame and unfair accusation. Her boss sees her as an object of pleasure as well as a threat to the reputation of his factory. Only Hasina is punished for “breaking the rules” of the system. As if this were not enough humiliation, she writes that after the incident at the factory, Mr. Chowdhury broke into her house and raped her. Once again, Hasina suffers from male abuse and, just like her sister, without anyone to go to, finds comfort only in her prayers.

It is important to point out that from where Hasina stands she sees Nazneen as a lucky woman, who has a smart husband and lives in a beautiful place in London. Although it is clear to the reader that Nazneen's apartment is small, shabby and cluttered, Hasina's life conditions are so precarious in Bangladesh that the image of her sister's home in London brings deep admiration:

My own sister what a beautiful room you live! At last I have see it after all many years asking. I putting photo on top of crate next to Raqib picture. When I have glass I think to put both inside frame. You never say about showcase corner cabinet wallpaper. It all ordinary like anything to you now. Every day I looking and think my own sister just there with showcase and corner cabinet and everything. (ALI, 2003, p.156).

Undoubtedly, Hasina has a very a romanticized perspective of her sister's life, which seems to be almost perfect, without the common problems she sees in Bangladesh. Almost a whole year goes by before Hasina writes to Nazneen again. She now works as a prostitute with her friend Hussain as her pimp: "Hussain still looking out for me. He the one making sure I get the money. If he not look out anyone take what they like and not pay" (ALI, 2003, p. 177). At this point, Hasina is unaware that she is part of a big system of women exploitation managed by men and that gender inequality was part of her social and cultural environment. Her letters express the naive nature of her personality, who is easily seduced and deceived by promises of a better life. Although she is unable to see "the big picture", Ali's narrative strategy should be clear to attentive readers.

Similarly to Nazneen, Hasina is unhappy with her life in a big city and also thinks 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, 2003, p. 178). In 1995, Hasina meets a man called Ahmed who wants to marry her. Hasina accepts the marriage proposal, but she is still anxious about her past as a prostitute. In her new home, Hasina spends most of her time inside her flat, doing housework and waiting for her husband to arrive from work: "Sister I know you enjoy to leave your flat. But I have come inside now. How I love the walls keep me here" (ALI, 2003, p.181). In the lives of the two sisters, one observes that home can be both a place of confinement and security. Having a place she can call home after so many years of uncertainty, Hasina enjoys the safety her home provides. Her happiness, however, doesn't last long, as her husband starts finding fault with her appearance, her house-cleaning, and her reputation: "He say things not in good order anymore even I do always try to keep it good ordered like anything. He say I put curse on him and that is why we marry. He say how his family going to take daughter-in-law like me?" (ALI, 2003, p.185). In 1996, Hasina writes one single letter telling that she is homeless and out of work. For five years, Hasina does not send any letters, which indicates her unsettled destiny in Dhaka. From what she has told in her letters, it might be assumed that she found herself in other predicaments during this long period of silence.

Five years later, in 2001, Hasina finally sends a letter to Nazneen saying that she has got a job as a maid in Dhanmondi. After that, the narrative shifts back to

Nazneen's life in London and she is again presented by the third-person narrator. Hasina's letters continue to appear and to be part of the development of the story. In other letters sent in the same year, Hasina writes about her renewed faith in God and her routine as a maid. She explains that she was taken from the House of Falling Women, a kind of social institution, by her new boss Lovely. She takes care of two children, does the laundry and washes the dishes. Once more, Nazneen asks Chanu to bring Hasina to live with them saying that she has faced some problems in Dhaka but omitting details that would reveal Hasina's precarious condition:

She could not explain. Hasina was still working at the factory. This was all Chanu knew. She hovered for the postman, hid letters, invented bland statements of well-being and minor mishaps. All she could do for her sister was deliver her from further shame and this was all she had done (ALI, 2003, p. 192).

Hasina pleads with Nazneen to send longer letters. She mentions the upcoming elections in Bangladesh and tells the story of her friend Monju, whose husband threw acid on her face and body. Hasina's words evoke the moment of instability in the country. By listening to the conversations between James and Lovely, the husband and wife she works for, and by narrating violent acts she witnesses on the streets, Hasina discloses to Nazneen the fear that has taken hold of the population in Dhaka. The possibility that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party come into power worries her boss:

Husband James talking with face inside a paper. Heavens he say just goes to prove. What this country need is more stability. How it going to help if government is change? The opposition parties is cause much trouble and go to people house for scare them and even rape of wife. Sometimes they pay the police for arrest-and-scare (ALI, 2003, p.287).

Meanwhile, in London, in the wake of September 11th, there are violent demonstrations against the presence of Muslims in the city, leaflets circulate around the area of Brick Lane claiming that "the islamification of the neighborhood has gone too far" (ALI, 2003, p. 275). At this point, we can perceive that there is a tense atmosphere in London as well as in Bangladesh. Both sisters' letters serve the purpose to disclose, even if it is through a personal text, the insecurity generated by political tension, racism as well as patriarchal oppression. In London, the community where Nazneen lives faces attacks against the presence of Muslims in the city. In

Dhaka, women are abused and disfigured by other men because of jealousy or money.

Other social issues in Bangladesh are also mentioned in Hasina's letters such as child labor and the increase usage of plastic bags, which eventually block drains and cause floods: "Street is wide and nice. But plastic bag blowing everywhere. Walk in street for five ten minute and by finish you cover in bag on legs and arms and stomach. Everyone hate the bag but also all accepting what can you do?" (ALI, 2003, p. 234-235). The issue of child labor comes up during a conversation between Hasina and Lovely, who announces that she is going to start a charity to stop child labor. Hasina reproduces their conversation:

Which ones you will stop I asking to her. Oh she say all of them. The maid next door? I asking her this. She look surprise. But really she like daughter to them. The boys on roof who is now mend gutters sweep leaves? She look bit cross. That different she say. Which are the one? The boy who come around sell butter? Lovely say are you washing that floor or not? (ALI, 2003, p.393).

Hasina's vision of what is going around her seems to be more sharpened than her boss's due to her past experiences of exploitation and abuse. Their conversation also reveals that from Lovely's standpoint, some forms of child labor are acceptable, especially when the children render services to her and to her neighbors.

Over the decades, Nazneen gradually becomes aware that life in Bangladesh has its own difficulties. The country she has idealized for so many years was a projection, not a real place. Just like other women there, her sister suffers from oppression and marginalization mainly because she is a woman, but also because she is poor and uneducated – conditions which are very much influenced by gender.

Nazneen starts a letter to Hasina with the intention of telling her about Karim, but she eventually gives up, tearing up the sheet of paper. Nazneen's letters, which seem to have gotten shorter, are written at longer intervals. She has become more interested in dealing with the events of her own story, unlike before, when Hasina's life seemed to have more action and excitement. I believe that because Nazneen feels guilty of her affair with Karim, she does not want to reveal it to her sister: "Nazneen knew she would never write about him to Hasina. Her next letter, when she got around to it, would follow in the footsteps of the others." (ALI, 2003, p. 415).

Hasina's last letter, dated October 2001, discloses her restlessness and dissatisfaction; she is tired of depending on other people's help and longs to have her

own place. This letter definitely contains the most important words that Nazneen has read all over the years. In her frustration, Hasina openly criticizes the way their mother taught them to behave:

Amma always say we are women what can we do? If she here now I know what she say I know it too well. But I am not like her. Waiting around. Suffering around. She wrong. So many ways. At the end only she act. She who think all path is closed for her. She take the only one forbidden. (ALI, 2003, p.475).

Then, Hasina discloses to Nazneen a secret hidden for a very long time: she saw her Amma commit suicide:

She take spear and test on the finger. She take another and put it back. And third one she take before is happy. When she move the rice sacks she grunt a bit but she never look around. Another sack I think is chickpea but inside the light is weak and I never go again to look (...) May Allah show His Mercy onto her. She see no other way (ALI, 2003, p.476-477).

Although she finds herself at a crossroads, Hasina rejects her mother's act of despair, saying that she would rather follow her heart and search for other ways to find happiness. Hasina's words mark a turning point in Nazneen's life, as it will be discussed later in the third chapter of this dissertation. For both sisters, 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, finally, to nourish their hopes that they will meet again.

2. POSTCOLONIALISM, FEMINISM, COSMOPOLITANISM

Since the end of the Second World War, 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, so that today a number of London's neighborhoods are known primarily in terms of the 'overseas' population.

John McLeod

I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent.

Monica Ali

2.1 Postcolonialism

The decolonization process of some nations after the end of imperialism made possible the emergence of postcolonial studies. These studies have focused on the effects of decolonization on previously colonized cultures or societies through various forms of cultural manifestations, such as literature, cinema, visual arts, etc. According to the definition given in *Post-Colonial Studies – Key Concepts* (2002), the term postcolonial “was first used to refer to cultural interactions within colonial societies in literary circles.” (ASHCROFT, 2002, p. 186). However, from the late 1970s onwards the term has been used “to signify the political, linguistic and cultural experience of societies that were former European colonies” (ASHCROFT, 2002, p. 186).

In addition, postcolonialism has not only encouraged the analysis of the political, economic, cultural and social effects of (de)colonization on colonized peoples but also considered the various signs of resistance given by specific groups looking forward to having a more active voice in the present world social order. By protesting against mystifications and exoticisms created by colonizers, postcolonial critics have provided space for reflection on complex themes such as identity and representation.

As for representation, it can be said that the study of its power upon colonized societies was marked by the publishing of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. In his book, Said aims at analyzing how European representations of the eastern world have shaped fixed notions about the colonial subject. Said argues that the West created a stereotyped view of the East, in which Easterners are seen as the Other, marking a difference that was essential to assert the primacy of the colonizing culture: "The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (SAID, 1995, p. 1). The concept of the Other is useful to define the identity of the postcolonial subject as produced by the colonizer. Groups that are represented as the Other, such as the decolonized people and other minorities that have been displaced, are often stereotyped, subject to labels and targets of marginalization and exclusion. People from the various South Asian cultures, for instance, have been typically treated as one monolithic group by the West. Before 1947, all South Asians were defined as Indian in Britain. After the Partition, they were subsequently re-defined as Pakistani and Indian, but more often than not either adjective was used indiscriminately to characterize both groups (HUSSAIN, 2005, p. 2). The term "Paki", an abbreviation for Pakistani, is also commonly used to refer to those people from the various South Asian cultures living in Britain. Regardless of their origin, they are called Pakis due to their skin color and inevitably become victims of racial discrimination. In "Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three moments in Post-War History" (2006), Stuart Hall mentions the "new sport of Paki-bashing" (HALL, 2006, p. 8) as one of the many forms of intolerance experienced by diasporic subjects in Britain. In one of the scenes of the film "Brick Lane", boys run around the council buildings of Tower Hamlets shouting "Go home, fucking Paki" as a way of protesting against the permanence of Indians, Pakistanis and Bengalis in the area. Although the scene is not taken straight from the book, its inclusion in the screenplay contributes to the verisimilitude of the story.

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha comments on the formation of the colonial discourse, highlighting the role of stereotyping as a main discourse strategy, which is fixed in the ideological construction of the other (BHABHA, 1994, p. 66). Bhabha discusses how the stereotype works in the production of the colonial discourse and objectifies the other. "The objective of colonial discourse is to construe

the colonized 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). Regarding the racial issue, the difference is visible and natural, “colour as the cultural/political sign of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural *identity*” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 80). Thus, Bhabha affirms that the colonized 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).

Bhabha’s theory does not preclude the possibility of resistance, though. In another chapter of his book, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” (1994), the theorist states that the colonized may eventually use some strategies in order to be heard. This mode of resistance is made through discourse, such as the use of mimicry. By copying the language, traditions and other European models of culture, the colonized attempt to be like the colonizer, reducing the possibility of being subjugated: “Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 86).

In Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, we observe that the characters who come from a formerly colonized area but who are at present migrant citizens from an independent nation-state and live in London – a former imperial center – are still treated as inferior and stereotyped as colonial subjects. Chanu, Nazneen’s husband, an immigrant from Bangladesh who has made his life in England, is proud of having a degree in English Literature from Dhaka University. He admires the culture of the colonizer and recites poems by heart. He feels superior to other Bangladeshi living in the same community he does because they do not have the same educational background. Curiously enough, Chanu is not able to have professional success in London despite all his qualifications and English education. Thus, the end of the colonization period and the emergence of independent states do not guarantee that the formerly colonized subject will be treated differently either in the home country or in the diasporic destiny.

When Chanu first moved to London he hoped to become a successful man before going back to his home country. He thought that the city was a land of justice and opportunity:

When I came I was a young man. I had ambitions. Big dreams. When I got off the aeroplane, I had my degree certificate in my suitcase and a few pounds in my pocket. I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me (ALI, 2003, p. 26)

He also believed that his extensive knowledge of literature put him at a great advantage in relation to other Bengalis living in the estate. One of his many schemes that never materialized was the creation of a library for Tower Hamlets.

Naturally, I would be in charge of running the mobile library. Who else would do it? It was my idea, my petition, my baby, so to speak. No one could be better suited than I to bring the great world of literature to this humble estate (ALI, 2003, p. 73).

However, years of successive frustrations eventually make him realize that he is excluded: his diploma from Dhaka University does not make his life easier in Britain; he never manages to get the long-awaited promotion at work or to achieve success in his professional life. He keeps taking courses in different topics and collecting diplomas that are proudly displayed on the walls of his crowded apartment, but he never settles in one specific job position. As a former colonial subject, Chanu received a British education, so it is very hard for him to accept that he is not valued by what he knows but by where he comes from:

He started every new job with a freshly spruced suit and a growing collection of pens. His face shone with hope. And then graced with frustration, with resentment. He began businesses with a visit to the shoe repairer and made outlays on hard-sided, brisk briefcases. 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, 2003, p. 215)

Over the years, Chanu's feeling of rejection and frustration gets so strong that he even resigns from his job at the local council because he loses hope of getting the long-awaited promotion. He is unemployed for some time, reading and making plans for the future but taking no action. He eventually buys a sewing machine for Nazneen with the money lent by the usurer Mrs. Islam, but he avoids talking to his wife about the loan. Chanu's decision to return to Bangladesh is strengthened by his awareness that all his life he has been treated with discrimination by the British society just like other immigrants from Bangladesh.

In "Writing Contemporary Ethnicities" (2008) Nick Bentley states that:

Chanu's narrative is another example of the legacy of colonialism on individuals in the present. His initial celebration of English culture and learning show him at first to be an appropriated colonial subject. His later position, however, represents colonization in reverse as he is now satisfied by taking money from the nation that had exploited his people in the days of the Empire. This bitter, yet more realistic position shows Chanu coming to terms with the economic realities of postcolonialism. (BENTLEY, 2008, p. 91).

When working as a taxi driver, Chanu is happy to receive money in the British territory: "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, 2003, p. 227).

So far I have used examples related to Chanu's life in England to comment on the experiences of a post-colonial migrant subject as represented in Ali's novel. However, taking into consideration that *Brick Lane* has a women protagonist and that the lives of other women characters are also relevant to the development of the plot, the issue of gender needs to be addressed.

2.2 Feminism (s)

I particularly believe that one of the most important aspects of postcolonialism is the opportunity to reject and even dismantle the many binary oppositions established by imperial discourse such as margin/center, self/other, man/woman. This trend is also characteristic of feminist theory, another very important area of study to be considered for our reading of *Brick Lane*. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1998) defines feminist criticism as "an attempt to describe and interpret (and reinterpret) women's experience as depicted in various kinds of literature". Influenced by poststructuralism and semiotics, French feminists such as Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous have focused on the role of gender and language in writing, maintaining that "all or most Western languages are male-dominated and male-gendered" (p. 318). In *The Newly Born Woman*, Helene Cixous (1986) points out that binaries represent women as negative or as an absent pole in relation to men:

Where is she?
 Activity/passivity
 Sun/Moon
 Culture/Nature
 Day/Night
 Father/Mother
 Head/Heart
 Intelligible/Palpable
 Man/Woman
 (CIXOUS, 1986, p.63-5)

After a period in the development of feminist theory when gender was the prevailing issue, other factors were taken into account as awareness of racial and class issues, among others, emerged. Chandra Talpade Mohanty is one of the feminist theorists who strongly criticize the mainstream feminist discourse, which deals with Western, white and middle-class women and, according to her, universalizes women's issues.

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 (MOHANTY, 2004, p. 55).

In *Feminism Without Borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity* (2004), Mohanty discusses the importance of analyzing the roles of women of the Third World in the context of feminism. By considering the effects of colonization on non-Western women, the theorist uses the term Third World women as a political category and aims to "explore the links among the histories and struggles of Third women against racism, sexism, colonialism, imperialism, and monopoly capital." (MOHANTY, 2004, p. 46). Mohanty also makes use of the concept of imagined communities, coined by Benedict Anderson (1983) to suggest the possibilities of alliances among women across boundaries – sisterhood - who share the same interests, irrespective of their locations.

Feminist theory has at times joined postcolonial studies and sought to deconstruct universal claims and eventually challenge the dominant male discourse. In "The Landscape of Postfeminism" (1998), Ann Brooks mentions many issues of commonality and difference between postcolonialism and feminism. Brooks recognizes that both discourses have aimed at exposing issues of repression and oppression. The author quotes Ashcroft *et. al.* that state that:

Feminism and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant, and early feminist theory, like early nationalist post-colonial criticism, was concerned with the inverting the structures of domination, substituting for instance, a female tradition or traditions for a male-dominated canon. But like post-colonial criticism, feminist theory has rejected such simple inversions in favor of a more general questioning of forms and modes, and the unmasking of the spuriously author/itative on which such canonical constructions are founded. (1995, p. 249).

It is also worth mentioning the crucial role that feminist theories have had in analyzing the mechanisms, causes and consequences of patriarchy. In *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1997), Chris Weedon defines patriarchy as:

power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take many forms, from the sexual division of labor and the social organization of procreation to the internalized forms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on the social meanings given to biological sexual difference. In patriarchal discourse, the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to men. (WEEDON, 1997, p. 2).

Undoubtedly, the work of Gayatri Spivak (1996) has been crucial to study the position of women as postcolonial subjects since the author's main concern is with the experiences of doubly-colonized women, who are subjected to both imperial and patriarchal ideologies. In this context of constant struggle to leave the margin and cease to be seen as the other, contemporary feminism has sought to question gender inequalities and transform both the political and social structure of postcolonial societies.

It is my belief that literature is a powerful mode through which oppressed groups may articulate their feelings and experiences. At this point it seems convenient to quote Roland Barthes (1977) who, when mentioning the importance of literature, claims that: "If, by I don't know which excess of barbarity, all our disciplines should be banished from education, except one, it is the discipline of literature that should be safe, for all the sciences are presented in the literary monument" (BARTHES, 1977, p. 18). Likewise, for Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, 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).

The conflicts, struggles and issues posed by postcolonialism have served as motifs for a generation of novel writers, giving rise to a genre now recognized as “the postcolonial novel”. Among the recurrent themes and characteristics of postcolonial novels, it is worth mentioning the characters’ struggle to overcome the difficulties derived from self-exile and typical of transnational diasporas.

Of special interest to this dissertation is the issue concerning the literature produced by women writers living in diaspora, an issue that stems from the broader context of postcolonial novels. Chris Weedon in her article “Migration, Identity, and Belonging in British Black and South Asian Women’s Writing” (2008) claims that

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).

On the whole, postcolonial studies allow for the emergence of new practices, which eventually create new boundaries, challenging the prevailing modes of thinking and writing.

2.3 The new diasporas

The word diaspora derives from the Greek term *diasperien*, from *dia-*, “across” and *-sperien*, “to sow or scatter seeds” (BRAZIEL & MANNUR, 2003, p.5). First used with a religious association, describing the experiences of Jews who lived in exile from Palestine, the term has been widely used to refer to movements and dislocations of people that have taken place since the second half of the twentieth century.

“Diasporas” (1997), written by anthropologist James Clifford is a key text for the study of diaspora discourses in contemporary times. In his essay, Clifford problematizes the use of the term diaspora by raising questions like:

How do diasporas discourses represent experiences of displacement, of constructing homes away from home? What experiences do they reject, replace, or marginalize? How do these discourses attain comparative scope while remaining rooted/routed in specific, discrepant histories? (CLIFFORD, 1997, p. 244).

By so doing, Clifford sets the context for a more comprehensive analysis of diasporic processes, which takes into account words such as “minority, immigrant, and ethnic” (CLIFFORD, 1997, p. 245). In addition, Clifford argues that issues of race, class and gender should always be considered when defining the term, for “at the level of everyday social practice, cultural differences are persistently racialized, classed, and gendered”. He also claims that “diasporic experiences are always gendered” (CLIFFORD, 1997, p. 258). Thus, the high incidence of women migrants in the last decades has led to a renegotiation of gender relations. However, Clifford notes that women might face more difficulties in the diasporic processes 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, 1997, p. 259). Such is the case not only of the women protagonist in *Brick Lane* but also of several of her neighbors, like Jorina, who is accused of bringing shame on her family because she decides to start working. After being forced to migrate to another country because of her arranged marriage, Nazneen struggles to keep the memories of her childhood alive while taking care of the house, husband and daughters and abiding by the patriarchal conventions of her religion.

Whether migrations are forced or voluntary, they deeply impact family dynamics for those who leave and the ones who stay. According to James Clifford, the 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).

However, it is relevant to state that diasporic processes might not encompass all the features abovementioned. There have been multiple experiences of different diasporas, with their own histories and particularities, and the process of adaptation in the new land is at times more important than the desire to return.

In their essay “Nation, Migration, Globalization: Points of contention in Diaspora Studies” (2003), Jana Braziel and Anita Mannur draw attention to the recent theorizations of diaspora in various fields such as literature, sociology and film studies. According to them, such theorizations

seek to represent (and problematize) the lived experiences (in all their ambivalences, contradictions, migrations, and multiple traversals) of people whose lives have unfolded in myriad diasporic communities across the globe. (BRAZIEL & MANNUR, 2003, p. 5).

Along with the study of diasporic processes, concepts such as nation and nationalism as well as the relations of the citizens and their homelands have been reconsidered. (BRAZIEL & MANNUR, 2003, p. 7). Braziel and Mannur suggest that diasporic movements be analyzed in the present context of globalization, in which national boundaries have become less fixed. Still, they highlight the relevance of historical and cultural specificity as they observe that: "Diasporic traversals question the rigidities of identity itself – religious, ethnic, gendered, national" (BRAZIEL & MANNUR, 2003, p. 3). Therefore, such diasporic movements provoke the emergence of hybrid identities which carry the effects of colonization and are marked by the processes of adaptation to the new environment. Theorist Stuart Hall argues that our identities are not unified or fixed but "...subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. [...] identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (HALL, 1990, p. 225). Then, constant transformations and ruptures caused by historical processes inevitably shape our cultural identities, as is the case with diaspora identities, "which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (HALL, 1990, p. 235).

In *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), Avtar Brah argues that diasporic movements are different in their origins and in the way the diasporic subject or group settles in its destination: "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 involves not only the attitudes of the diasporic subject towards the new "home" but also the attitudes of the "native" subjects towards those who arrive. Gender, class, race, religion and language are all highly influential in the process of acceptance and of identity formation of migrant subjects. According to Yasmin Hussain in *Writing Diaspora* (2005), generalized discrimination against South Asians in Great Britain has fostered the unity among Pakistani, Indian and Bengali migrants regardless of the conflicts existing among them in the subcontinent. (HUSSAIN, 2005, p. 34).

After the World War II, with the onset of the so-called “colored migration” on a “mass scale”, racial violence and racism against South Asians became common practices in Britain (HUSSAIN, 2005, p. 20). By the 1960’s, minority groups felt the need to call attention to their own ethnicity, getting together to strengthen their cultural practices. Despite the positive aspect of these associations to the settlement of other immigrants in British society, South Asians have become encapsulated and isolated (HUSSAIN, 2005, p. 21). The idea of being part of a local community constituted of people with the same origin might seem the best choice for an immigrant in a foreign country.

In *Brick Lane*, several passages attempt to describe how Bengali (or Bangladeshi) immigrants live in the community of Tower Hamlets. Nazneen’s short journeys around the estate give us a notion of the environment and way of living of the characters created by Monica Ali, living in a community set aside in a specific area of London:

She smiled at the Bengali girls who chattered about boys at top volume on the stairs but fell silent as she passed. Razia introduced her to other Bengali wives on the estate. Sometimes they would call and drink tea with her (...) She did not look at the group of young Bengali men who stood in the bottom of the stairwell, combing their hair and smoking (...) In the summer evenings they stood outside next to the big metal bins and played with the iron shutters that should have kept the bins out of sight. (ALI, 2003, p. 41).

In one of the visits to Razia’s cluttered apartment, Nazneen remembers Chanu’s description of how Bangladeshi immigrants live in Tower Hamlets:

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, 2003, p. 44).

The official site for the actual community of Tower Hamlets¹¹ provides a special link named equality and diversity, which aims at clarifying doubts about how the local government deals with the issue of prejudice in the community. Although the diversity in Tower Hamlets is considered a positive feature, the text recognizes recurrent problems of discrimination against ethnic minority communities:

¹¹ http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgsi/851-900/861_diversity_and_equalities.aspx. Access on February 4th, 2011.

Tower Hamlets is one of the most ethnically diverse boroughs in the UK. The borough's diversity is one its greatest strengths. However, we also know that some communities, particularly black and ethnic minority communities, tend to suffer disproportionately from poverty, ill health, unemployment and educational underachievement.

In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali presents several of the problems listed and discussed on the official site of the community. By so doing, the author necessarily raises awareness to the common but unnoticed difficulties faced by minority communities living in the big cities.

Since the bomb attacks to the London underground system in July 2005, Europe has been debating its different integration models for immigrant communities. When investigations revealed that young men of Pakistani origin and British nationality had been responsible for the bombing, there was a strong reaction from British citizens who had supported their country's integration policy so far. According to the Gulbenkian Migrations Forum 2009, the multicultural model adopted by the UK has been facing a crisis. A key issue raised is that European societies might be under threat by immigrants' cultural and religious practices.¹²

Language is another matter that should be taken into account when analyzing the integration process, especially for those who are part of the second generation of diaspora. Hussain argues: "Identity and language are entwined to such an extent that a closer examination of South Asian communities reveals linguistic social divisions, which are also generational". She also remarks that while the first generation of migrants from South Asia suffered discrimination and stereotyping because their relationship with the white British was only based on economic matters, the second generation's knowledge of the English language allowed them to receive a different treatment from the white British. (HUSSAIN, 2005, p. 27).

In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen's difficulty to adapt to the new culture and to feel included in the new environment is aggravated by the language barrier. Upon her arrival, she does not know a word in English and her communication is limited to her neighbors from Bangladesh and to her husband, who sees no need for her to learn a language and adapt herself to her new environment. Nazneen's daughters are the ones who eventually teach English to their mother. They use their parents' mother tongue only when forced to by their father. To the elder daughter Shahana, who was

¹² <http://www.plataformaimigracao.org/noticias/f%C3%B3rum-gulbenkian-migra%C3%A7%C3%B5es-2009>. Access on February 4th, 2011.

born in London and speaks English much better than her father, Bengali poses no interest whatsoever; rather she faces the task of learning and practicing her parents' native tongue as an imposition which she resents and rebels against. At this point in her life she feels no connection with their culture.

2.4 Postcolonial London- cosmopolitan and exclusionary

Since *Brick Lane* is primarily set in London, the city's long story of migration plays a central role in the novel, for the city includes a variety of nationalities with different cultural and religious practices. In "Representing British Bangladeshis in the Global City: Authenticity, Text and Performance" (2010), John Eade highlights that the arrival and settlement of people from British (ex) colonies during the 50's and the 60's contributed to a rapid racialization of London's population. Most immigrants concentrated in the area of East London, where they could find cheap accommodation and low-paying jobs at nearby garment factories:

Brick Lane and its adjoining streets, built by the Huguenots, became the commercial heart of a new 'community' and one building, in particular, came to represent the succession of immigrants in the area – the Huguenot chapel, which became a Jewish religious centre before it emerged as the Great Mosque. With the arrival of wives and dependants during the 1980s and early 1990s a settled Bangladeshi community emerged. (EADE, 2010, p. 3).

In *Postcolonial London – Rewriting the metropolis* (2004), John McLeod examines different representations of London as a postcolonial metropolis by analyzing the work of writers familiar with the history of colonialism. The writers, including Doris Lessing, Joan Riley, Salman Rushdie and Janet Frame, expose diverse social contexts of diasporic communities living in the city. The selected texts also contribute to raise awareness of attitudes of prejudice, racism and resistance that have marked the history of the city since the 1950's. In the introductory part of the book called "Locating postcolonial London", McLeod argues that the use of the term 'postcolonial London' is effective because "London occupies a particularly significant place in the evolution of postcolonial oppositional thought and action, and has long been an important site of creativity and conflict for those from countries with a history of colonialism." (McLEOD, 2004, p. 6). Besides, he affirms that the selected texts are engaged in exploring the "heterogeneous, diverse and polycultural

character of the city's society and culture." (McLEOD, 2004, p. 7). According to McLeod, since the end of the Second World War, London's social and cultural life has undergone some transformations that reveal the impact of decolonization process upon the metropolis, such as mass migrations of peoples into London from ex-colonized countries, the establishment of London-born transnational communities and the transition from London's imperial metropolis to a transcultural city of the world (McLEOD, 2004, p. 7). In "Cosmopolitas e Subalternos: Kiran Desai e a poética do deslocamento nos espaços transnacionais" (2010), Sandra Almeida observes that two groups specified in her title are directly affected by contemporary globalization, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism: poor and clandestine immigrants in the post-modern big cities and ethnic and social groups that are marginalized in the nation-states. (ALMEIDA, 2010, p.116).

Although *Brick Lane* is not one of the novels discussed by McLeod, he does mention Monica Ali as one of the writers who expose the various stories of immigrants who have settled in London and learnt how to negotiate their space in the city. Furthermore, some issues brought up by McLeod in his discussions of the selected novels are also pertinent to our reading of *Brick Lane*. As Nazneen and her family live in Tower Hamlets, home to Bangladeshis who migrated to the city, the setting is inevitably intertwined with narratives about the individual characters. Feelings of dislocation and discrimination contribute to singular perspectives about the city. Nevertheless, considering that most immigrants live in exclusive boroughs, communities or city districts, we might wonder to what extent those enclosed areas make them invisible to the others. They exist as a community, not as individuals. As it is pointed out by John McLeod:

Although it is difficult to identify typical or indicative experiences when exploring the social and cultural history of postcolonial London owing to the divergent trajectories involved, responses to the settlement of diaspora communities have tended to ignore many newcomers' cultural and historical differences and mobilized instead the homogenizing modality of race. (McLEOD, 2004, p. 22).

South-Asian immigrants who live in the area of Tower Hamlets, just like in the fictional story of Nazneen and her family, are not expected to reside outside the limits of the immigrant community, which is often an urban setting.

In *Brick Lane*, after living in London for about thirty years, Chanu decides to go sightseeing with his family around the city. His clothes and actions resemble those of

a genuine tourist, which eventually leads the conductor of the bus to ask him where he is from. “Two blocks behind” (ALI, 2003, p. 312), Chanu says, but he still wants to know the opinion of a ‘local’ about where to visit first. They eventually visit the Buckingham Palace, the national headquarters of the British government with a ballroom which is “one hundred and twenty-two feet long, sixty feet wide, and forty-five feet high” (ALI, 2003, p. 314). Chanu’s excitement in reading the guidebook probably derives from his realization that he is face to face with buildings and monuments that symbolize the British Empire. Nonetheless, he can relate to this national feature of London only as an outsider despite having lived there for thirty years. Thus, I agree when McLeod puts forward that London is “a profoundly disruptive location” (McLEOD, 2004, p. 18), where new social relations and cultural forms often clash with a firmly rooted sense of cultural nationalism.

Additionally, concepts such as cosmopolitan/cosmopolitanism need to be further explored as they highlight significant aspects of the contemporary moment for immigrants living in communities in big cities. The word cosmopolitan characterizes these places as homes for individuals that are citizens of the world. Defined by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, cosmopolitanism is “a sense of positive if complex and multiple belonging” (CHEAH & ROBBINS, 1998, p. 3). Bruce Robbins points out that similar to diaspora, cosmopolitanism provides more than “a gallery of virtuous, eligible identities.” (CHEAH & ROBBINS, 1998, p. 12). The author chooses the term cosmopolitics so as to “describe from within multiculturalism, a name for the genuine striving toward common norms and mutual translatability” (CHEAH & ROBBINS, 1998, p. 12).

Nevertheless, doubts are also raised about the value of this cultural diversity since it might become a source of both discrimination and exclusion. In most urban societies in Europe, inhabitants of multi-ethnic suburbs are often marginalized and persecuted by a hostile nationalism, which invariably results in a visible social inequality. *Brick Lane* brings to the foreground the prejudice against minorities in multicultural London, especially after the events of September 11th.:

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, 2003, p. 400).

Issues such as immigration, diversity, citizenship and integration have been debated by many journalists and researchers on the online magazine *Eurozine* in an attempt to call attention to what has been happening in the European Union. As it is stated by Per Wirtén, in his article “Free the nation – Cosmopolitanism now!” (2002):

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.¹³

In one of the passages from *Brick Lane*, Nazneen goes out alone around the city looking for Shahana who has run away. While searching for her daughter, Nazneen sees people and places in the city which represent the cosmopolitan aspect of migrant communities mentioned above:

Nazneen looked up to the balconies. A woman in a dark blue burkha hung a prayer mat over the railing, and withdrew. A small child trundled a red plastic truck along a balcony and back, over and over again. At the end, near the sick orange light of a lamppost, two black children sat behind bars, watching their new world. Where had they come from? What had they escaped? Nazneen had learned to recognize the face of a refugee child: that traumatized stillness, the need they had, to learn to play again. (ALI, 2003, p.513).

2.5 Women and the new cosmopolitanism

In “Women and the New Cosmopolitanism” (1998), Josna Rege points out that most recent theories on new cosmopolitanism have not considered the role of women in the current field of globalization. Hoping to bridge the gap between theoretical approaches to cosmopolitanism and the contemporary realities experienced by women, Rege suggests that new initiatives should be made in global women's studies so as to work with women's global and local movements to discover their needs and attempt to address them. In the same article, Rege mentions the feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak, who actually preceded James Clifford in discussing the major role women have played in contemporary diasporas. In her article “Diasporas old and new: women in the transnational world” (1996), Spivak defines old diasporas as “results from religious oppression and war, of slavery and indenturing, trade and

¹³ <http://www.eurozine.com/bravenewworld/articles/2002-11-22-wirten-en.html>. Access on February 4th, 2011.

conquest, and intra-European economic migration” (SPIVAK, 1996, p. 245). As for the new diasporas, Spivak relates them to the notion of a transnational world, which in her view, allows for a neo-liberal economic system that values profit over social redistribution. Considering the role of women in the transnational world, Spivak argues that some issues involving them are still not thoroughly investigated, such as 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). This is the case of Nazneen, Razia and the other women who work in the sewing business although they are not always aware of the large system of production they take part in. Similarly, non-diasporic women might also participate in the same system of labor exploitation, as Hasina does when working in a sweatshop in Bangladesh.

Avtar Brah also claims that as “women have become emblematic figures of contemporary regimes of accumulation” (BRAH, 1996, p. 179), there has been a feminization of migrations. Therefore, these women migrants’ experiences have contributed to change the language of diaspora. In spite of the fact that a diasporic female subject still suffers marginalization and exclusion, women’s active role in the new social and cultural context has undoubtedly provided space for questioning the issue of gender in a hybrid setting.

It is my belief that with *Brick Lane* Monica Ali encourages the reading and writing of texts that are shaped by our contemporary context of decentralization, mobility and fluidity. Ali’s novel focuses on stories about those who have always been on the margin, invisible, and whose experiences were not considered relevant for History. Like other novels by contemporary migrant writers, *Brick Lane* approaches identity as a complex process 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). On the whole, *Brick Lane* succeeds in depicting trauma, excitement, disappointment, and other emotional consequences of migration. Nazneen’s emancipation happens along with the emotional and cultural aspects of migration, the common discrimination, the difficulties of settling in and adapting to a completely different country and the feeling of dislocation.

3. NAZNEEN'S JOURNEYS

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

So that, 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 and 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.

Monica Ali

3.1 Non-places

In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen, the female protagonist, tries to reconstruct/rewrite her spatial and temporal displacement through her memories and dreams. Her memories of her childhood and of her sister Hasina in Bangladesh are recurrent, surfacing in moments when Nazneen's sense of displacement overcomes her. Her daydreams, which take the form of flashbacks in the narrative, may be interpreted as a subconscious attempt to recover a place, an identity that was left behind. Even when she is asleep, Nazneen's thoughts are directed to some past episodes involving her and her family in the village. Besides, in her imagination she is constantly visited by her dead mother, who appears to Nazneen in her apartment in London or in her nightmares.

In *Non-Places: Introduction to Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1994) French anthropologist Marc Augé analyzes the relationship between human beings and the surrounding space as well as the issue of identity and collectivity, offering a broad understanding of the notion of mobility and how the feeling of estrangement affects certain individuals in the contemporary world. Augé states that we live in times of

production of non-places, which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity (AUGÉ, 1994, p. 77). Public places such as airports, subway stations, hotels and supermarkets are examples of non-places, described as alienating spaces, in which we are forced to spend more and more time of our lives. Augé establishes a clear connection between the effects of supermodernity and the occurrence of non-places. Such supermodernity is characterized by excesses, by lack of control and relationship, by abundance of information and transformations happening at a brisk pace (AUGÉ, 1994, p. 109).

In *Liquid Modernity* (2000) sociologist Zygmunt Bauman discusses the notion of non-places and spaces, explaining that “non-places accept the inevitability of a protracted, sometimes very long sojourn of strangers, (...) to make their presence “merely physical” while socially little different, preferably indistinguishable altogether...” (BAUMAN, 2000, p. 102). Bauman states that as differences might be put aside, “they may also be made invisible or, rather, prevented from being seen.” (BAUMAN, 2000, p. 103). It is precisely at this point that Bauman resorts to the concept of ‘empty spaces’, coined by Jerzy Kociatkiewicz and Monika Kostera as “places that are first and foremost empty of *meaning*.” (BAUMAN, 2000, p. 103). According to Bauman, empty spaces are devoid of meaning because they are perceived as meaningless or not perceived at all. A person would feel lost, vulnerable and frightened in those places especially because they do not provide affection or any significant bond.

The notions of non-places and empty spaces shed light on many situations lived by Nazneen in *Brick Lane*, as she struggles against her spatial and temporal displacement and tries to make her present more tolerable.

3.2 Home

Those who have experienced diaspora along with the geographic, linguistic, cultural, and psychic displacements accompanying it may feel as if they were inhabiting a non-place or living in an in-between place. With time, this liminal condition may either reinforce the sensation of not belonging or usher in a gradual process of acceptance –
 the new home.

Instead of adopting an essentialist notion of home when analyzing the features of immigrants' subjectivity, it seems clear that a broader perspective, which considers gender, race, nationality and ethnicity, will take into account the historical complexities of some groups, such as women immigrants. According to the definition found in *New Keywords – A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2005),

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 (p. 162-163).

Thus, home should be considered a subjective concept, a product of historical and cultural elements, “the lived experience of a locality (...) the varying experience of the pains and pleasures, the terrors and contentments.” (BRAH, 1996, p. 192). For some diasporic subjects, home is not a place of comfort and safety, but a site of confrontation. Hence, immigrants' empirical experiences in the new setting must be taken into account so that the notion of “home” can be problematized. The diasporic subject's position in the world might be uncertain because the idea of belonging to a place does not necessarily refer to a physical site, but it can be linked to the family or to shared cultural codes and beliefs. Hence, the notion of belonging has to do more with the subject's identity than with their physical location. As Brah suggests:

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).

If we follow a binary line of thought, there will be two opposing conditions: being at home and not at home. Yet, if we consider the multiple processes and positions experienced by diasporic subjects in different locations, we conclude that discourses do not exist in isolation from others. Immigrants in England, for instance, might feel both belonging and not belonging depending on categorizations such as nationality, race and gender. As Brah states: “the binary is a socially constructed category whose trajectory warrants investigation in terms of how it was constituted,

regulated, embodied and contested, rather than taken as always already present” (BRAH, 1996, p. 184).

In the second chapter of *Brick Lane*, we get to know Dr. Azad, who is invited to have dinner with Chanu and Nazneen. Chanu is hopeful that he can get the promotion at work with the help of the influential doctor. Dr. Azad is very quiet and serene, which contrasts with Chanu’s loud and talkative manners. At dinner Dr. Azad talks about the problems of the Bengali youth who are going to pubs and nightclubs. Then, when Chanu mentions his plans to go back to Bangladesh in order to escape from the bad influence of certain British habits in his children’s upbringing, the doctor comments on the Going Home Syndrome, a disease affecting most immigrants. Chanu says “It is natural. These people are basically peasants and they miss the land.” (ALI, 2003, p. 24). For Chanu, it is normal that immigrants who have not adapted to life in the city wish to go back to their homeland. However, as they can never save enough money to do so, they try to reproduce their origins in a foreign land: “Their bodies are here but their hearts are back there. And anyway, look how they live: just re-creating the villages here” (ALI, 2003, p. 24). Then, Dr. Azad reveals that he too had the Going Home Syndrome:

I used to think all the time of going back, said Dr. Azad (...) Every year I thought, ‘Maybe this year.’ And I’d go for a visit, buy some more land, see relatives and friends, and make up my mind to return for good. But something would always happen. A flood, a tornado that just missed the building, a power cut, some mind-numb piece of petty bureaucracy, bribes to be paid out to get anything done. And I’d think, ‘Well, maybe not his year.’ And now, I don’t know, I just don’t know (ALI, 2003, p. 25).

Through the character of the doctor’s wife, Mrs. Azad, Monica Ali offers yet another perspective on the issue of home, thus highlighting the multiplicity of diaspora experiences. When Chanu and Nazneen unexpectedly show up at Dr. Azad’s house, they have the chance to get to know the doctor’s wife, who has a very direct speech and manners. When talking about immigrants’ situation in England, Chanu points out that “to be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy” (ALI, 2003, p. 116) since there is a conflict of values. He mentions the difficulties some immigrants may find in their way while trying to adapt to new cultural and social practices: “I’m talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one’s identity and heritage. I’m talking about children who don’t know what their identity is” (ALI, 2003, p. 116).

As it was mentioned before, diasporic subjects are characterized by hybridity, which may lead to the fragmentation of their identity as they learn to cope with different cultures. Consequently, next generations might also experience this conflict when trying to define who they really are. The children of diaspora are in charge of preserving their heritage while they grow up in another culture and environment. Nevertheless, we are presented with a divergent point of view when Mrs. Azad strongly disagrees with Chanu saying that he makes things too complicated:

Fact: we live in a Western society. Fact: our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact: that's no bad thing. My daughter is free to come and go. Do I wish I had enjoyed myself like her when I was young! Yes!" (...) 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, 2003, p. 116-117).

Mrs. Azad's lines are a vivid expression that although she is a diasporic subject, she does not feel displaced or unable to deal with a different culture. Her assertiveness and outspoken character are rather incomprehensible to Nazneen who, upon hearing Mrs. Azad talk, finds it difficult to regard her as a Bengali immigrant:

'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. Some women spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the kitchen grinding spices and learn only two words of English.' She looked at Nazneen, who focused on Raqib. 'They go around covered from head to toe, in their little walking prisons, and when someone calls to them on the street they are upset. The society is racist. The society is all wrong. Everything should change for them. That', she said, stabbing the air, 'is the tragedy' (ALI, 2003, p. 116-117).

Mrs. Azad's clear ability to cope with both cultures and her pragmatic analysis of the behavior adopted by Bengali (women) immigrants in London is visibly shocking to both Chanu and Nazneen.

Stuart Hall uses the word translation to describe identity formations which draw on different cultural traditions without belonging to only one:

...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).

Therefore, Mrs. Azad's notion of home is certainly very flexible. Although she does not deny her Bangladeshi origins, she does not feel forced to follow aspects of her original culture's tradition where she lives. She negotiates both cultures and admits having a hybrid identity. According to Yasmin Hussain in *Writing Diaspora* (2005), Mrs. Azad represents what is central to the work of theorist Homi Bhabha: the concept of hybridity, which "is not limited to the cataloguing of difference and the sum of its parts, but emerges through the process of opening 'a third space', where elements of diverse origins encounter each other and a mutual transformation results." (HUSSAIN, 2005, p. 12).

For the protagonist of *Brick Lane* the processes of adaptation to her new home and of negotiation between different cultures are more complex as Nazneen initially does not see in London any possibility of happiness and security. In "Diasporas" (1994), anthropologist 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, 1997, p. 255). He argues that diaspora cultures usually live "experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place" (CLIFFORD, 1997, p. 255).

3.3 Dislocation - flashbacks and daydreams

In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen resorts to her memories of Bangladesh and of her sister Hasina so as to escape from her painful reality in London. Her routine lacks pleasure and excitement. She spends her day doing housework and barely leaves the apartment. By the window, she observes the tattoo lady who lives in the opposite building but never dares to go there and talk to her. Apart from the dull routine, Nazneen feels displaced in her surroundings in Tower Hamlets where she sees "dead grass and broken paving stones" and where life taking place behind the curtains of the other flats is "all shapes and shadows" (ALI, 2003, p. 8). Reading the Qur'an and praying calm her down temporarily, but only in her memories and dreams, which take her back to her village and her sister, is she able to escape her feeling of displacement. The images of Nazneen's dream are associated with nature, colors, affection and freedom, all elements that Brick Lane fails to give to her:

Silent. Nazneen fell asleep on the sofa. She looked out across jade-green rice fields and swam in the cool dark lake. She walked arm-in-arm to school with Hasina, and skipped part of the way and fell and they dusted their knees with their hands. (...) And heaven, which was above, was wide and empty and the land stretched out ahead and she could see to the very end of it, where the earth smudged the sky in a dark blue line. (ALI, 2003, p. 13).

Even while Nazneen is awake, her mind drifts back into the past and she loses herself in daydreams. In one instance, while having some yogurt, she remembers stories about her childhood: "It was a long time since Makku had come to her mind. But when she was small, she used to follow him around. Hasina and Nazneen walked behind him, holding hands and swinging their free arms." (ALI, 2003, p. 76). In another moment, when Nazneen can not concentrate on her sewing work wondering if she should tell Hasina about her affair with Karim, she again has a recollection of her childhood in Bangladesh:

Casting around in her mind, she rejected all the words that came. How could she make Hasina understand? She meandered back into the village. Tamizuddin Mizra Haque was Gouripur's barber. Beneath the shade of a moss-encrusted papal tree he set up his shop with three or four stools, two buckets, special soaps and oils, cutlasslike razors, and his gleaming scissors, the cleanest and brightest object for miles around (ALI, 2003, p. 411).

This parallel reality made up of dreams and daydreams is to a great extent more concrete and meaningful to Nazneen than her daily routine in her apartment in Brick Lane. As a Muslim girl, Nazneen had been taught to accept her Fate without standing in its way. Her mother used to say that Fate eventually decided everything, regardless of the route a person followed. Nazneen always listened to her mom telling the story of "How You Were Left to Your Fate". When she was only four days old, Nazneen didn't want to feed, but her mom didn't take her to hospital or give her medicine believing that: "She doesn't know what to do. Probably it is her Fate to starve to death." (ALI, 2003, p. 4). Somehow, Nazneen survives and grows up, abiding by the code that "what could not be changed must be borne": "Fighting against one's Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, or perhaps most times, it can be fatal. Not once did Nazneen question the logic of the story" (ALI, 2003, p. 5). Thus, Nazneen does not allow herself to have wishes because she does not believe they will make any difference in her life. She is convinced that she must accept things

the way they are, whether it involves marrying an ugly stranger much older than she or being uprooted from the life/place she had been contented with.

Nazneen defies fate for the first time when “her baby’s life [which] was more real than her own” (ALI, 2003, p. 81) is in danger. Raqib gets seriously ill and she takes him to the hospital, pondering how she reacted differently from her mother, who did not do anything to save her when she was a baby because fate would decide everything in the end. Such thought infuriates Nazneen, who cannot accept that a mother would do nothing to save her own child. She is anxious to write a letter to Hasina and tell her that she fought for her child, but in the end she doesn’t mention this in her letter. After scribbling different versions, Nazneen suppresses her anger and writes:

My dearest sister, I hope everything is well with you. The baby has been sick in hospital, but we expect to bring him home soon. Chanu has given up his job. I do not worry, and you must not worry. When the baby is home, I will write again. A long letter next time. Pray God keep you safe (ALI, 2003, p.149).

But Raqib dies in the hospital. Together with the pain of having lost her child, Nazneen feels very guilty for going against fate and trying to save him. In one of the constant dreams Nazneen has, her dead mother accuses her of having killed her son:

‘You thought that it was you who had the power. You thought that you would keep him alive. You decided you would be the one to choose.’ She began to spit the words out and drops of red flew with them. ‘When you stood between your son and his Fate, you robbed him of any chance’ (ALI, 2003, p. 474).

Because her attempt to interfere with fate results in failure, Nazneen lives her following years in London in passive acceptance of everything that comes her way, submissive to her husband and to what she sees as the designs of fate.

Due to this deterministic view of the world, Nazneen sees her future as something already traced and feels powerless to change her life. In moments of anxiety, her thoughts invariably take her to her sister Hasina who stayed in Bangladesh and who, unlike Nazneen, paid no attention to fate or listened to anyone.

The distinction between Nazneen’s past rural place of living and her urban environment in Brick Lane is made clear right from the beginning of the novel.

Nazneen cannot find any joy in living in a place where the front doors “were all the same” (p. 48). In chapter four Nazneen’s vision of her ideal home is evoked:

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, 2003, p. 86).

Once again there is both a clear association between nature and freedom and a clear contrast between the place where she lives and the one she wishes for. Nazneen’s confinement in the apartment all day long forces her to seek comfort in her memories. Her feeling of nostalgia is softened when she reads Hasina’s letters:

Whenever she got a letter from Hasina, for the next couple of days she imagined herself an independent woman too. The letters were long and detailed. Nazneen composed and recomposed her replies until the grammar was satisfactory, all errors expunged along with any vital signs. But Hasina kicked aside all such constraints: her letters were full of mistakes and bursting with life. Nazneen threaded herself between the words, allowed them to spool her across seven seas to Dhaka, where she worked alongside her sister. Raqib came as well. Sometimes, at the end of the day, she was surprised when Chanu arrived home. Then she made vows to herself. Regular prayer, regular housework, no more dreaming. She sent brisk, efficient letters to Hasina, (ALI, 2003, p. 93-94).

The letters create fantasies of freedom for Nazneen, who can move past the walls and bricks that trap her in Brick Lane by using her imagination. Up to this point, Nazneen still has a romanticized image of her homeland that is often undermined by her friend Razia who argues that “if everything back home is damn wonderful what are all these crazy people doing queuing for visa” (ALI, 2003, p. 468).

In order to emphasize Nazneen’s feeling of misplacement, alienation and powerlessness in a strange land, Monica Ali uses the narrative technique of defamiliarization, which was introduced by Viktor Shklovsky (1983), member of the Russian school of Formalist Criticism. As defined in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1998), “to defamiliarize is to make fresh, new, strange, different what is familiar and known” (p. 214). In the following passage, we see how the physical space of London outside the run-down area of Tower Hamlets looks unfamiliar to Nazneen:

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 other 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, 2003, p. 51).

In this passage, the urban landscape, seen through the eyes of Nazneen, achieves a futuristic, almost fantastic aspect, which aggravates her feelings of displacement, invisibility and helplessness. For her, London is a non-place, an empty space that does not provide the warmth and security she had in Bangladesh. That is why her recollections of the homeland are vital for her. As it is claimed by Hussain:

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).

Nazneen develops an interest in watching ice-skating shows on TV, which help her forget the boredom of her routine as a housewife. In fact, Nazneen sees in the ice-skating couple the fulfillment of the fantasy of romantic love, something that she has never experienced. In the female ice-skater, she sees the expression of femininity and mobility that she both lacks and desires:

Nazneen held a pile of the last dirty dishes to take to the kitchen, but the screen held her. A man in a very tight suit (so tight that it made his private parts stand out on display) and a woman in a skirt that did not even cover her bottom gripped each other as an invisible force hurtled them across an oval arena. The people in the audience clapped their hands together and then stopped. By some magic they all stopped at exactly the same time. The couple broke apart. They fled from each other and no sooner had they fled than they sought each other out. Every move they made was urgent, intense, a declaration (...) 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, 2003, p. 29-30).

Alistair Cormack in "Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form: Realism and the Postcolonial Subject in *Brick Lane*" (2006), observes that in this passage Ali uses the actual reference of very popular ice-skaters in England in the eighties, Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean, who won the gold medal with a dance based on Maurice Ravel's *Bolero* (CORMACK, 2006, p. 709). Surely, Ali's inclusion of factual

figures in the fictional world contributes to a more pragmatic perspective in the analysis of Nazneen's relationship with certain elements of British culture. I also agree with Nick Bentley's argument in "Writing Contemporary Ethnicities" (2008), as he elaborates on the positive influences of watching ice-skating for Nazneen:

The romantic image of the woman freed from the constraints of dress, subordination to the male and seemingly gravity itself, present an alternative world to Nazneen who is weighed down with domestic duties, and the figure of the ice-skater becomes a symbol of freedom in the novel. (BENTLEY, 2008, p. 89).

Reciting the Qur'an, daydreaming, reading Hasina's letters, and watching ice-skating on TV are all activities that help Nazneen cope with her sense of misplacement. She indulges into the memories of her past every moment she feels lost and deserted.

3.4 Questioning her position as a subject

Gradually, Nazneen realizes that she is going through a crisis between what she really is and what she appears to be. What she feels is akin to what sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois defined as double consciousness, when discussing the predicaments of African-Americans in a racist society: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of the others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (BOIS, 1970, p. 8). The path that leads to Nazneen's self-awareness is intersected by the changes that happen in her daily life. The help and incentive of her neighbor and strong-willed friend Razia is instrumental for Nazneen's transformation. It is thanks to Razia that Nazneen first takes up some sewing work that enables her to start her own savings, to contribute to the family budget and, consequently, to acquire some autonomy, even if it is in the confines of the apartment. When Chanu is unemployed, it is the money that she earns through her sewing work that pays the bills as well as his debts with Mrs. Islam. Chanu objects to Razia because he thinks she is too modern and independent, not a respectable type, but Nazneen sees in Razia a role model of strength and courage. When her husband was alive, Razia's life was also limited by patriarchal constraints: "Jorina can get me

a sewing job, but my husband will come to the factory and slaughter me like a lamb.” (ALI, 2003, p. 127). But after becoming a widow, Razia needs to support herself and her two children, so she starts working at a sewing factory:

A serious thing, though, the business with the machine work. [...] Only thing I care about is they don't have to do this same thing as me. Making a nice home as well. New chairs, new sofa, no more secondhand toothbrush for my kids. This is what I'm working for (ALI, 2003, p.198).

Razia has somehow assimilated British culture and eventually becomes a British citizen. At the end of the novel, she has managed to start her own sewing business with Nazneen and other women from the community, Hanufa and Jorina.

Karim, the young man who delivers the clothes Nazneen has to sew, also plays a crucial role in Nazneen's life. Their affair brings Nazneen sexual pleasure and fulfillment, sensations that she had never experienced in her marriage with Chanu, but it also troubles her, for she knows she is transgressing the moral and religious precepts that she had grown up with:

He was the first man to see her naked. It made her sick with shame. It made her sick with desire (...) In between the sheets, in between his arms, she took her pleasure desperately, as if the executioner waited behind the door. Beyond death was the eternal fire of hell and from every touch of flesh on flesh she wrought the strength to endure it. (ALI, 2003, p. 322).

It is through her relationship with Karim that Nazneen becomes aware of the political issues involving her religion in the world. Karim was born in England but is proud of his parents' Bangladeshi origin. In one of the meetings organized by the Bengal Tigers, the group of young activists whose aim is to stop discrimination against Muslims, Nazneen sees that other Muslim women, wearing the hijab and even the burkha, are capable of expressing their political views despite the submissive nature of their dress code. As it is discussed by Sandra Almeida in “Cidadãs da diáspora: a escrita do corpo e as ficções cosmopolitas na contemporaneidade” (2009), the female body symbolizes metonymically the values of a national, religious and ethnic community. If, on the one hand, wearing the burkha might be one of the most visible signs of male oppression against women, on the other, it is worn as a symbol of their Muslim pride, a rejection to Islamic constraint on

freedom of speech, as well as a refusal to conform to western behavior patterns. (ALMEIDA, 2009, p. 157).

Inevitably, Nazneen's sense of identity is affected. As she was taught that only men had the right to ask questions and women should meekly accept what life gave them, the image of Muslim women, just like herself, taking part in a political meeting that is mostly attended by men definitely awakens Nazneen to a different reality.

It is important to note that, at this point in the novel, Nazneen's nostalgic memories of Bangladesh aren't as recurrent as they were before:

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, squinting into the sun, vision mottled with netting and eyelashes. As the years passed the layers of netting multiplied and she began to rely on a different kind of memory. The memory of the things she knew but no longer saw. It was only in her sleep that the village came whole again. (ALI, 2003, p. 230).

Her routine is also influenced by the affair with Karim. The boredom of the past is replaced by a sudden joy:

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, 2003, p. 324).

After some time, we see that Nazneen is torn between her affair with Karim and her role as a mother and wife. In chapter fifteen, she suffers from a nervous breakdown and collapses on the kitchen floor. Just before that, she has a vision of her mother, who tells her that she just has to endure to pass God's test. According to Amma, all women have to bear difficulties and bad moments in life. While in bed for several days, Nazneen has hallucinations with her deceased son, her daughters, her husband, her mom and Karim. It seems that she does not want to continue to live the way she is living because of feelings of guilt and shame: "Where the water clouded with mud, where the light could not reach, where sound died and beyond the body there was nothing: that was where she wanted to be." (ALI, 2003, p. 350).

When she gets better, Nazneen resorts to the Qur'an to find some comfort, but she can't. Only the reading of Hasina's letters could give her peace. However, Nazneen now sees Hasina as a victim of fate: "Fate, it seemed had turned Hasina's

life around and around, tossed and twisted it like a baby rat, naked and blind, in the jaws of a dog.” (ALI, 2003, p. 368). Watching ice-skating on TV does not cheer her up anymore: “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. Turn it off, she said.” (ALI, 2003, p. 395). She starts to spend time at the window, as she used to do when she arrived in London, but instead of the idyllic visions of jade-green fields that inhabited her imagination, Nazneen sees only the real flats and people who live on the estate: “Now she saw only the flats, piles of people loaded one on top of the other, a vast dump of people rotting away under a mean strip of sky, too small to reflect all those souls” (ALI, 2003, p. 395). The terrorist attacks in the US on September 11th are definitely a turning point for Nazneen’s family because Chanu finally takes a step further and decides to move to Bangladesh as soon as possible:

The projects stopped. There was only one project and that meant no unnecessary expense could be entertained. No more gadgets for the computer or the car. Even book expenditure was curtailed. Chanu drove for long hours and when he returned he was too tired to talk about the ignorant types who rode in the back (ALI, 2003, p.405).

Little by little, Nazneen perceives that both Chanu and Karim are deeply affected by the events of September 11th. As Karim grows more radical in the defense of Muslims, he changes his dressing style, leaving jeans, shirts and trainers behind. When Karim mentions his plans to get married to her, Nazneen realizes that she is very unsure about her future. Leaving her husband means going against what fate had chosen for her. But waiting for fate’s decision is no longer a comforting thought. “Why should she wait? [...] Suddenly her entire being lit up with anger. I will decide what to do. I will say what happens to me. I will be the one. A change ran through her body and she cried out again, this time out of sheer exhilaration” (ALI, 2003, p. 442-443). Although Karim has told her that she is “the real thing” (ALI, 2003, p. 419), Nazneen gradually realizes that even her lover has an idealized image of her. “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, 2003, p. 497). For him, who has never visited his parents’ land but engages in a revolutionary position in order to fight for the rights of the Muslim community in Brick Lane, being with Nazneen means getting to know more about the

idealized land he has never known. Cormack observes that Karim's behavior is influenced by his fantasized notion of femininity:

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 also realizes that both of them created images of each other so that they could feel more confident about their choices. "Oh Karim, that [the sin] we have already done. But always there was a problem between us. How can I explain? I wasn't me, and you weren't you. From the very beginning to the very end, we didn't see things. What we did—we made each other up." (ALI, 2003, p. 498). As it is claimed by Sandra Almeida in "Mobilidades contemporâneas, espaços gendrados: os múltiplos espaços discursivos da literatura de autoria feminina" (2008), the reason why Nazneen refuses to accept Karim's marriage proposal is not guilt for the "sin" they committed, but the awareness that the power to decide the course of her life has always been inside her. (ALMEIDA, 2008, p. 27). Nazneen realizes that their relationship was essential in her process of independence and self-reliance, but she is ready to move ahead.

3.5 How Nazneen left her fate

By going against the rules a Muslim village girl from Bangladesh would have to comply with, Nazneen eventually transgresses the role of submissive South Asian wife, putting at risk her marriage and challenging old beliefs: she does not see fate as her guide anymore. Her attachment to the past, especially her holding on the image of her childhood in Bangladesh has given place to a flexible idea of belonging. The concept of 'flexible citizenship' coined by anthropologist Aihwa Ong (1999) may be useful to describe the experience of migrants who, just like Nazneen, eventually become open to new cultural ideas and practices. According to Ong

'flexible citizenship' refers to the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing

political-economic conditions (...) These logics and practices are produced within particular structures of meaning about family, gender, nationality, class mobility and social power (ONG, 1999, p. 6).

Surely, although Nazneen does not work outside her house, she actively participates in the economic cycle of the city she lives in as we have already discussed in the second chapter. In her particular case, the move to London was not her choice, it resulted from a transaction between her father and Chanu, the prospective husband. Thus, in this context, the woman's body is assigned a mercantile value and functions as currency. Still, I find the term "flexible citizenship" useful here not only because of the economic implications but also because of the transformations Nazneen undergoes, epitomized in the image of Nazneen ice-skating while wearing a sari, which will be discussed later.

When Chanu is trying to convince his children that, according to a newspaper report, the Bangladeshis are the happiest people in the world, Nazneen disagrees and decides to tell him the truth about her sister:

And she started to tell him the things that she had hidden from him over the years, and at first she stumbled around as if it were lies she were telling and not the truth, and then the words began to flow and he was stiller than she had ever seen him, a slackness in his face, and she told him about her sister and left nothing out, beginning with Mr. Chowdhury, the landlord, the one who (Chanu had said) was a respectable-type (ALI, 2003, p. 381).

Despite all problems and uncertainties that are going on in Bangladesh, Chanu still thinks that going back is better than staying. The increasing discrimination and the constant threats of violence against Muslims after September 11th drive Chanu to finally save money to go back "home". However, Nazneen, who had spent part of her adult life longing to return, is not sure if going back will make her feel more protected and happy. Not only did Hasina's letters reveal the difficulties she faced to make a living but they also exposed the negative aspects of living in her homeland. Now that the romantic vision of Bangladesh does not prevail anymore, Nazneen is willing to face the facts of her life that cannot be avoided. She realizes that "she was not the girl from the village anymore" (ALI, 2003, p. 420).

After years of passive observation of Chanu's oppressive attitude towards Shahana and her constant disruptive remarks to her father, Nazneen finally decides to interfere and take a stance. When Chanu opposes to the girls going to the festival

organized by the Bengal Tigers, Nazneen takes part in the discussion:

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 if she has ripped out their tongues. "And Shahana, show respect to your father (ALI, 2003, p. 378).

Nazneen's change of approach is a sign of her awareness that she is also entitled to get involved in her daughters' upbringing.

Furthermore, Nazneen's relationship with her daughters, especially Shahana, is extremely meaningful in her decision to stay in London. The elder daughter keeps telling her parents that she does not want to go to Bangladesh and that her home is in London. Even though Nazneen's daughters are representative of both cultures, they lack interest in Bangladesh and its customs despite their father's insistence that they memorize long poems of the Bengali tradition:

Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking, She wanted to wear jeans. She hated her kameez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them. If she could choose between baked beans and dal it was no contest. When Bangladesh was mentioned she pulled a face (ALI, 2003, p. 188-189).

In the last chapter, Shahana runs away from home as she has threatened to do before. In despair, Nazneen goes after her daughter across the streets around Brick Lane, where a riot is taking place. Two rival organizations are battling each other, the Lion Hearts, which is against the Islam, and the Bengal Tigers, which fight for Muslim rights and culture: "Missiles rained across the road. Empty bottles, full cans, a brick, a chair, a winged stick. A bottle smashed at Nazneen's feet. She decided to run again. But which way?" (ALI, 2003, p. 518). There is so much confusion on the streets that Nazneen does not know which is the best way to go to the Shalimar Café, the place Bibi said Shahana would go to. She runs into Karim, who urges her to go home, but just then Nazneen sees Shahana and her friend. At home, Chanu still insists that going back to Bangladesh is the best decision for them and reminds Nazneen of her dream to be together with Hasina: "Let us look forwards from now on. When we move to the bungalow, your sister will come to live with us." (ALI, 2003, p. 523). But Nazneen is determined not to go.

What's more, the awareness that her mother committed suicide, a revelation

contained in Hasina's last letter, has a sudden effect on Nazneen and frees her from the burden of the past. The language used evokes Nazneen's newly-found freedom:

The paper was pale blue and light as a baby's breath. Nazneen looked at the outline of her fingers beneath the letter. She held her hand open, flat. Hasina's letter lifted at the ends, cleaving its folds. Breathless, she watched it flicker and held it by her fascination alone, like a butterfly that alights from nowhere and, weightless, displaces the world. (ALI, 2003, p.478)

Hasina's letter helps Nazneen to come to terms with the influence of her mother's teachings in the course of her life, including the guilt she had carried for so many years for having interfered with fate while trying to save her son's life. Just like Hasina, Nazneen is determined to have a more incisive attitude towards the situations presented to her. Afterwards, Nazneen is brave enough to confront Mrs. Islam, a usurer who exploits other people on the grounds of her religious beliefs and, consequently, feels entitled to threaten Nazneen and her family.

In the end, Nazneen manages to perceive that as she has gained autonomy to reject both her lover's marriage proposal and her husband's idea to go back to Bangladesh, she has become able to find her place in the world. Her final decision to stay in London with her two daughters might be seen as a key element in the process of identification with the (no longer) strange land. Finally, her house in Brick Lane and even London cease to be non-places as they become meaningful to her, with affective and significant bonds.

In addition, it becomes clear that Nazneen will not teach her daughters the same lessons she received as a child. This can be seen when she decides not to tell them the story of *How You Were Left to Your Fate* anymore. Her respect and consideration for her daughters' wish to stay in London also results from Shahana's courage and determination not to accept what her parents have planned for her. Yasmin Hussain argues that: "It is through the children that Ali's work illustrates the changing femininities. It is their children who most vividly question and re-define their own roles, rather than slipping into what is prescribed for them." (HUSSAIN, 2005, p. 108).

At the end of the novel, Bibi, Shahana and her friend Razia surprise Nazneen 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 passage 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 colors 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, 2003, p. 541).

As it is pointed out by Nick Bentley: “The end of the novel confirms this 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, 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, as Razia says, but because Nazneen has come to terms with her subjectivity. As Cormack observes:

The mobility and sexual freedom promised by the skaters early in the novel are now available to Nazneen. That this scene represents something more ideological than physical, and that it has been achieved through the plots previously mentioned, is indicated by the fact that Nazneen is already there in her mind. (CORMACK, 2006, p. 711).

Ice-skating for the first time is the physical consolidation of the liberation she has managed to achieve. It is in a small apartment located in a wall-bricked neighborhood that Nazneen gains autonomy and independence as she frees herself from the patriarchal constraints represented both by her husband and her lover.

For many years, London was a non-place for her, empty of meaning or identification. The memories and dreams of Bangladesh were elements through which Nazneen could give herself an identity, and try to recover what Augé defines as the anthropological place, “a place of identity, of relation, of history” (AUGÉ, 1994, p. 52). But Nazneen’s process of identification with what was before a non-place for her is possible because she has managed to develop an emotional bond with Brick Lane and the people around her. The feeling of inclusion and understanding is meaningful to Nazneen’s sense of belonging. The fact that Shahana and Bibi were born in Brick Lane and see London as “home” also play significant role in Nazneen’s acceptance of the place.

4 CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have aimed at showing that the fictional narrative of *Brick Lane* is more than a story about the separation of two sisters and their struggle to find their place in the world. Through the journeys of Nazneen and Hasina, the novel discloses significant historical, cultural and sociological elements that have influenced our vision of the world. While the context of contemporary London reveals the possibility of multiple experiences for female diasporic subjects who often have to cope with patriarchal values in operation in the home countries, the environment of Bangladesh exposes the predicaments and challenges faced by women who are also subjected to male oppression.

Undoubtedly, through the character of Nazneen, *Brick Lane* articulates the sense of alienation and displacement often experienced by diasporic subjects. Her journey towards self-empowerment is intertwined with the personal conflicts of her husband Chanu, her friend Razia, her lover Karim and her daughters, especially Shahana. Other Bengali immigrants that cross Nazneen's path, such as Mrs. Islam and Mrs. Azad, also play a very important role in Nazneen's questioning of her own existence. Besides, the novel succeeds in depicting different stories of assimilation and adaptation of Bengali immigrants in London. By so doing, Monica Ali highlights the complexity that marks the diaspora experience and sheds light on the contradictions of multicultural London society. While the city's diversity has already been celebrated as part of an open and tolerant model of integration, London has also been the setting of racist and exclusionary movements, which segregate even more the ethnic communities and disregard their internal differences, be it in class, gender or nationality. When examining the relation between migrants and their host societies, Susan Friedman (2009) points out that some immigrants have been "racialized and stigmatized, segregated from the mainstream of their new homelands and never fully accepted or given access to opportunity because of their racial or religious difference." (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p. 11). Even as I write this conclusion in February of 2011, the controversy regarding the most appropriate way to deal with the different immigrant groups living in Great Britain still rages on. At a Security Conference that took place in Munich, the British prime-minister David Cameron criticized the doctrine of state multiculturalism, claiming that it has caused the

emergence of segregated communities in the United Kingdom¹⁴. For Cameron, building a stronger sense of national identity is the key to prevent people from turning to any kind of extremist movement. The prime minister also stated that a more active and muscular liberalism is needed, and suggested “there would be greater scrutiny of some Muslim groups which get public money but do little to tackle extremism.” Although the minister argued that Islam and Islamist extremist are not the same thing, the Muslims are again in the spotlight. It seems that because of ethnic and religious differences, Muslims are not seen as common citizens and are constantly accused of propagating terrorism in Europe. I agree with Friedman when she remarks that “the failures of integration, especially into educational, economic, political, and cultural institutions” (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p.11) have contributed to the segregation of immigrants in particular areas of big cities like London. We have commented on many passages from *Brick Lane* that expose this discriminatory and exclusionary facet of London, which has been even more evident since the episodes of September 11th. As the narrator comments at one point: “A pinch of New York dust blew across the ocean and settled on the Dogwood Estate.” (ALI, 2003, p. 400).

The context of Bangladesh which is shown through Hasina’s letters brings to the foreground more personal issues such as male domination and violence against women, which are recurrent in Bangladesh. Even after having become an independent nation-state, Bangladesh still experiences the consequences of a history of colonization, exploitation and religious wars. By exposing Hasina’s experiences in the garment factory industry, which are based on real accounts taken from Naila Kabeer’s *The Power to Choose*, Ali gives voice to a marginalized and oppressed sector of the Bangladeshi society. Women, just like Hasina, who eventually suffer discrimination in their workplace due to a very strong patriarchal system, are often led to prostitution and marginalization. I believe that the strength of Hasina’s character lies in her ability to speak out, representing the subaltern or marginalized members of the society. In “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity” (1997), Stuart Hall elaborates on what he sees as the most impacting cultural revolution of the twentieth century:

New subjects, new genders, new ethnicities, new regions, and new communities – all hitherto excluded from the major forms of cultural representation, unable to locate themselves except as decentered or subaltern – have emerged and have acquired

¹⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12371994>. Access on February 11th, 2011.

through struggle, sometimes in very marginalized ways, the means to speak for themselves for the first time. (HALL, 1997, p.183).

Hall claims that if we observe the recent trends not only in literature, but also in film, music and modern art, we will be able to notice that the margins have found a space to come into representation. According to him, this happens because there is a form of globalization that is trying to live with difference, to question what happens to those “who did not go ‘above’ the globalization but went underneath, to the local” (HALL, 1997, p. 183).

The literary representation of Bengali immigrants – male and female - living in contemporary London together with an exposé of the predicaments faced by women living in Bangladesh, the choice of a female protagonist who after living her adolescence and part of her adulthood resigned to accepting “her fate” gradually but firmly decides to take control of her life – all contribute to make *Brick Lane* a novel associated with the “cultural revolution” described by Hall.

Nazneen’s experiences are also representative of the myriad of possibilities available to diasporic subjects living in big cities like London. Whether they try to incorporate the culture of the host country or preserve homeland language and cultural practices, immigrants often have to endure discrimination and, most of the times, are presented with few educational and professional opportunities.

Many passages of the novel depict Nazneen’s feeling of invisibility when walking outside the community where she lives. Her keen observation of other people’s behavior and attitudes provides more than an insight into her thoughts; it contributes to the building of a character that is trying to be the protagonist of her own story.

The study of the historical and sociological contexts of Bangladesh, along with the cosmopolitan and multicultural aspects of London, provided me with a rich source of information, which proved extremely useful when analyzing the different ways the characters in the novel could be associated with both places. As significant historical events are mentioned in the novel, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11th and the political conflicts in Bangladesh, I believed that research on the effects of colonization and decolonization on both Bangladesh and England would certainly benefit my work. As it is pointed out by Sandra Almeida, the recent social, cultural and geopolitical contingencies urge us to review the standards that have until now

given support to a literary analysis of contemporary works, mainly those written by women. They have also led us to conceive new ways of analyzing as well as devising new theoretical tools that encompass the complexity involved in the present historic context in which we live. (ALMEIDA, 2008, p. 19).

Marc Augé's and Zygmunt Bauman's concepts, which are discussed in the third chapter of this work, were both useful and pertinent to my reading of *Brick Lane*. The way Nazneen initially deals with the feeling of isolation resulting from her dislocation, by resorting to memories and dreams of her childhood with her sister, has to do with her lack of identification with her reality in London. Thus, *Brick Lane* succeeds in exploring common themes of the diaspora experience, such as alienation, disillusionment and uncertainty. Issues of home, belonging and identity are also dealt with in the novel through the experiences of all its diasporic characters.

In an article entitled "Marketplace Multiculturalism" (2003), M. K. Chakrabarti claims that there is a dominant industry that publishes and promotes books like *Brick Lane* and *White Teeth* (2000), by Zadie Smith, which are considered representative of the multicultural scenario of Britain today.¹⁵ Chakrabarti agrees that Monica Ali's novel "takes us inside the world of London's Bangladeshi immigrants" and that Chanu "places the narrative into the context of a wider, more complex world—of poverty, racism, and marginalization". However, the critic concludes that, on the whole, the novel fails to expose the "dark side of multiculturalism—the real multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural society that the majority of us do not want to see." For Chakrabarti, *Brick Lane* turns to a more dramatic and domestic plot instead of focusing on the "messy multicultural world" of Britain today. Thus, the critic points out that the book publishing industry has been responsible for the emergence of "supposedly multicultural authors" and the commercial success of these multicultural books.

Surely, the issues raised by M. K. Chakrabarti are worthy considering in a discussion of Monica Ali's novel. Although Ali does not dwell so much on "messy multicultural" London, she offers glimpses of that world. Many passages of the book portray existing problems in immigrant communities such as drug dealing and addiction as well as the formation of gangs. Despite the controversy about the novel's "authentic" portrait of London multicultural society, I still believe that *Brick Lane*

¹⁵ <http://bostonreview.net/BR28.6/chakrabarti.html>. Access on February 11th, 2011.

delivers a fascinating combination of characters whose stories are somehow linked to the moment we are living now. Whether in London, Paris or New York, histories/stories of migration have become part of the narratives - both real and fictional – of these big cities. Although *Brick Lane* does not include all possibilities of storytelling in the context of multicultural London, Ali's choice to tell the story from Nazneen's perspective was fundamental to my reading of the novel.

In an article entitled "Tirando o véu do preconceito - A visão estereotipada do Ocidente sobre as mulheres muçulmanas" (2010), professor Samira Adel Osman states that the situation of the Muslim women is plural, which means that their social situation and country of origin are key factors in the way they deal with oppression, prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping. (2010, p. 36). For the past years, there has been a strong debate in the media with the purpose of denouncing and condemning domestic violence, gender inequality, genital mutilation, and death by stoning, all issues directly associated with the condition of women in Islam. I completely agree with Osman when she points out that examples of cruelty against women are recurrent in non-Islamic countries as well. Recent situations of extreme violence against women in Western countries, like Brazil and Argentina, for instance, confirm this assumption. The 'disappearance' of Elisa Samudio and the confirmed murder of Mercia Nakashima that took place last year in Brazil are only two instances of episodes of violence that Brazilian women face today, irrespective of their age, social and professional situation or educational level. The atrocity of the crimes, which were planned and committed by the victims' ex-boyfriends, generated a wave of protest across the country, but as with so many incidents of violence against women, they will likely be forgotten and the criminal will likely escape due punishment. In Argentina, information disclosed by *Observatorio de Femicidios*¹⁶ revealed that 260 women were murdered in the country in 2010. The report details that the majority of the murders were committed by the victims' husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends and ex-boyfriends. It seems that the weight of patriarchy and its principles of domination and superiority are not restricted to Eastern nations. As it is claimed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (1992) :

Moreover, just as there are various colonialisms or systems of domination operative historically, there are various patriarchies operative historically, not one universal

¹⁶ <http://argentina.indymedia.org/news/2011/01/768083.php> Access on February 3rd, 2011

"patriarchy". There are various positions of men to patriarchy, not just an equivalence among them. (SMITH & WATSON, 1992, p. xxviii e xxix)

In "Notes toward a Politics of Location" (2001), the poet and essayist Adrienne Rich claims that patriarchy has always been the model for other forms of domination: "the power men everywhere wield over women, power which has become a model for every other form of exploitation and illegitimate control" (RICH, 2001, p. 69). Thus, going back to the stories of women in *Brick Lane*, we find different forms of male domination, whether it is in the domestic sphere (led by their husbands or fathers) or in the work environment (led by their bosses or workmates).

For many years, a number of novels with female protagonists have helped to consolidate a socio-ideological view of women, which has contaminated several genres, from Jane Austen's novels to Barbara Cartland's best-sellers. Such notion seems to contribute to the preservation of patriarchal societies' values and beliefs, which ultimately makes an apology of the heroine who is eventually redeemed from her sufferings through marriage.

I believe that *Brick Lane* - together with other novels written mostly after the second half of the twentieth century - breaks with this old pattern, offering a social and ideological representation of women that challenges patriarchal values, which are still dominant in many parts of the world today. Although the novel reveals the existent regime of male oppression, it also shows that neither Nazneen nor Hasina finds true realization and happiness through marriage, whether it is an arranged or a romantic one. The fact that Nazneen decides to stay in London without her husband and to reject her lover's marriage proposal is a remarkable element in the novel, which contributes to its ideological significance.

According to Jonathan Culler, literature has not only made identity one of its themes but has also played an important role in the construction of readers' identities. (CULLER, 1999, p. 110). Thus, the importance of reading *Brick Lane* also lies in the fact that it invites readers to question preconceived notions of identity for women. Despite the open-ending of the novel, the narrative focuses on the protagonist's achievements through her own efforts, with the help of other women.

After watching the film "Brick Lane", I felt that the reading of the novel would be an important step towards gaining more knowledge about the experiences of female diasporic subjects. During the process of writing my dissertation, I found that several themes in the novel could be developed and explored. Surely, I could have

chosen to approach the novel in many different ways, but I believe that my decision to analyze Nazneen's coming to terms with her subjectivity was somehow encouraged by my previous readings of other stories, by other writers.

The controversy aroused among Bengali immigrants living in the factual community of Brick Lane was a key element in the discussion about the ideological power of a literary text. A literary text as such does not possess an immanent, monolithic meaning, which is kept unchanged through time. As different cultures hold different beliefs and ideologies, different cultures read the same literary texts in different ways.

For this reason, I believe that literature has to do with the opportunity of making connections. Students and teachers of literature should be aware of aspects involving ideological and social representations. Rather than keeping the long-established concern with stylistic choices and aesthetics, the teaching of literature has the potential to involve students into an interactive process, in which texts are rewritten constantly at every reading.

The reading of *Brick Lane* has definitely helped me broaden my views on the condition of Muslim women today. Several Muslim characters appear in the story, offering a series of different profiles of Muslim women, not all of them submissive and dependent on men's authority. Such is the case of Mrs. Islam, who represents the feminine side of oppression in the community. Through the almost Westernized characters of Razia and Mrs. Azad, we see the changing nature of Muslim women who find it easy to adapt to the new cultural practices, often abandoning former religious precepts. In the image of Nazneen ice-skating while wearing a sari we may glimmer a potential synthesis of cultural habits. What I'm trying to highlight here is that Ali explores the different possibilities through which gender manifests itself, whether through an emancipatory perspective or by means of an emphasis on its oppressive character. (ALMEIDA, 2008, p. 25).

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