



**GENDERED DIASPORIC IDENTITIES IN MICHAEL
ONDAATJE ANIL'S GHOST, MONICA ALI'S BRICK LANE
AND JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE**

BIDVE SUCHITA N.

Lecturer in English

Purammal Lahoti Government Polytechnic,

Latur (MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Diaspora writing denote highly contradictory and contested categories through which to make and unmake cultural interventive and parochial, depending on their position within their new national home, their communal affiliation with their ancestral homeland, and their internal differences of class, gender, and race. I examine the ways in which globalization—a highly-uneven process that involves, among other things, the spread of global brand names, the transnational flow of goods, knowledge, images, labor, capital, and immigration at an extraordinary pace— challenges I compare and contrast the identity paradigm with a Diasporic theorization of cultural, transnational and gendered identity from an interdisciplinary postcolonial perspective. This research paper majorly concern/explore how the processes of globalization and transnationalism impact the theorization of cultural, transnational and gendered identity in Michael Ondaatje Anil's Ghost, Monica Ali's Brick Lane and Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake. Ondaatje in Anil's Ghost addresses issues of ethnicity and identity. The shifts in individual identity of the central character Anil Tissera constitutes the core of the novel which presents the problematic of one's ethnicity and identity in today's world. Jhumpa Lahiri, the 2000 Pulitzer Prize winner portrays the sufferings of the second-generation immigrants in The Namesake as a consequence of cross-cultural conflict with her debut novel The Namesake. . In the case of Monica Ali's Brick Lane, the good stemming from Nazneen's upward mobility seems to be rather more selective and gendered than it is common. By gendering upward mobility and presenting women's informal labor as the focus of the novel. These novels are diasporic in consciousness and deals with the issues

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of adaptation, adjustment and accommodation in a world where the boundaries are thinned or often blurred.

Key Words: *Diaspora, Globalization, Immigration, culture, Identity, Gender*

INTRODUCTION

Asian women migrating to Europe and North America sometimes bring with them – or are expected to bring with them – traditional gender ideologies where family and procreativity are valued over the individual self. Indeed, diasporic situations can sometimes intensify the idea of men as negotiators with the external world and women as custodians of traditional culture within the home. Many diasporic women do successfully renegotiate inherited cultural values; others cling to them defensively even while gender ideologies are changing within India itself. Most often, their responses to conflicting gender ideologies are (understandably) inconsistent.

I would like to begin by comparing the nature of the diasporic communities in the three texts, with a particular focus on their gender ideologies, before going on to explore the ways in which the protagonists respond to them, reshaping their own identities and to some extent the nature of the diasporic communities themselves in the process.

Agree For Marriage:

In contrast to Nazneen, a poor girl from a Bangladeshi village, Ashima is from a middle-class family in Calcutta, and although her marriage too is arranged, she does at least have the opportunity to meet the prospective bridegroom and give her consent. Ashima and Ashoke meet each other in India during his visit from Boston where he has been working on a PhD for two years, researching fiber optics. Ashima has never heard of Boston or of fiber optics, but Ashoke seems pleasant enough, so she agrees to the marriage. On the other hand Anil remembers her studies in London and a experience of bad marriage to Sri Lanka medical student.

Love affair and Arrange Marriage :

Ondaatje Anils ghost depicts Anil's (self)destructive passion, her marriage in medical school with a many-armed seducer|with whom she shares days of battle and fuck|lends as she —buries| his presence, while —never replaying any of their days together. Anil is dislodged| in her affair with married science writer and author-figure Cullis, with their intimacy. In Monica Ali's Brick Lane, the protagonist Nazneen migrates from a Bangladeshi village to the Brick Lane area of London's East End in an arranged marriage at the age of 18.



“This woman was poor and fat. To Nazneen it was unfathomable. In Bangladesh it was no more possible to be both poor and fat than to be rich and starving.”

Before the marriage, Nazneen has never before met her 40-year-old husband Chanu, who turns out to be kind enough, but unsuccessful, socially awkward, insufferably pretentious, and in many ways deeply unattractive. Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* also has an arranged marriage to a man who lives abroad, but her situation is very different.

Feelings:

In *Anils Ghost*, Anil meets and is sedately struck by a Sri Lankan medical student, who seemingly arrives in the way a circus arrives. The only time when as Anil describes

“he turned up from Sri Lanka in bangles and stilts” (Ondaatje 142).

Throughout Anil’s struggles, this was a breaking point. It was the the part of her life that affected her the most surrounding the various discoveries she has made. In the story her strong feelings of who and who not to trust are shown later on in the novel.

Nazneen in *Brick Lane* has mixed feelings about her husband but ends up assimilating within her community in London so successfully that at the end she refuses to return to Bangladesh with her husband Chanu. How Nazneen saying goodbye to Karim spells out

“She touched his hand for the last time. “Oh, Karim, that 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.

By contrast, Ashima in *The Namesake* falls in love with her husband fairly quickly, and they go on to have a long and happy marriage. However, she always misses India and decides to move back there after her husband’s death, leaving her grownup children behind in the United States.

Bicultural:

The women in both of these novels have children who grow up bicultural, though in both cases parental influence appears to be limited in terms of shaping cultural identity. Nazneen’s children in *Brick Lane*, who have never been outside of London, grow up mainly British, and Ashima’s children in *The Namesake* grow up mainly American, despite the family’s frequent and prolonged visits to India.

Difference (In Terms Of The Diasporic Communities):

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Anil can be appropriate in this case are those of a 'traveller' diasporic and 'migrant'. The biggest difference is that a traveller intends to leave again from the place he/she goes to, either in order to return to his origin or to continue the journey to another place. A migrant, however, plans to leave his origin for good and wants to establish a new home at his destination. That might, of course, not always work out for the migrant and he quite often does return, but this return is then usually the result of resignation and failure. Anil has features of both a traveller and a migrant.

The Namesake and Bricklane differ in terms of the diasporic communities in which their characters are placed. To put it simply, the characters in Brick Lane are in a working-class, predominantly Bangladeshi neighborhood in the East End of London, with little interaction with people from outside their ethnic community. The Bengali community in The Namesake, by contrast, consists of professional men with their dependent wives and children. They too are a closely knit community, though they are geographically dispersed, each family living in a predominantly white suburban neighborhood. While the parents in The Namesake tend to socialize mostly with other Bengalis, the children grow up American, enjoying close friendships and eventually romantic relationships with people from outside their ethnic community. Although they sometimes encounter a lack of understanding or lack of interest in their cultural background, they experience no overt racism, in contrast with the characters in Brick Lane who sometimes bear the brunt of anti-Muslim sentiment in the wake of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. These considerations could at least partly explain the differences between the two diasporic communities in terms of the degree of patriarchal control to which the women are subjected. All over the world it has been observed that patriarchal oppression tends to intensify not only in situations of poverty but also in situations of communal conflict. The impoverished Bangladeshi men in Brick Lane, particularly during a time of heightened tension between ethnic groups, will feel more threatened and therefore want to exercise more control over their wives and daughters than the successful Bengali professionals in the comfortable liberal environment of Massachusetts in The Namesake. Anil in Anil's ghost is traveller, migrant, and diasporic.

Gender Ideologies(similarities and differences):

In Michael Ondaatje Anil's Ghost, Anil had been given two entirely inappropriate names and very early began to desire "Anil which was her brother's unused second name. She had tried to buy it from him when she was twelve years old, offering to support him in all family arguments.

With regard to gender ideologies, there are similarities and differences between the two diasporic communities and the female characters have various ways of negotiating them. In this respect, perhaps the most obvious element in both novels is the complete dependence of the wives 'at home' on their husbands 'out at work'. This is not to say that the women do not work; on the contrary, it is emphasized in both novels that female domestic labour in the



diaspora is constantly demanding, absolutely necessary, and largely unnoticed. This is vividly expressed in Monica Ali's Brick Lane which gives us concrete details of Nazneen's daily life, including the results of her brief hiatus from domestic chores during her illness. She woke to find that:

The sitting room crawled with toys, clothes, books and abandoned kitchen utensils... Nazneen picked her way across the room without comment. It gave her some satisfaction. For years she felt she must not relax. If she relaxed, things would fall apart. Only the constant vigilance and planning, the low-level, unremarked and unrewarded activity of a woman, kept the household from crumbling.

Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake has a similar reaction when she returns from the hospital to find that

'there are dirty dishes stacked in the kitchen, that the bed has not been made'.

From a more privileged background than Nazneen in Brick Lane, she is accustomed to domestic help in India, and the narrative tells us that:

Until now Ashima has accepted that there is no one to sweep the floor, or do the dishes, or wash clothes, or shop for groceries, or prepare a meal on the days she is too tired or homesick or cross... But now, with a baby crying in her arms... it is all suddenly unbearable.

More assertive than Nazneen in Brick Lane, Ashima urges her husband to hurry up and finish his PhD so that they can return to India. However, she is shown to have no more control over her life than the more submissive Nazneen.

Dependent on Their Husbands:

On the contrary, both women are completely dependent on their husbands whose decisions about their lives are based exclusively on their own career choices. Against Ashima's wishes, she and Ashoke end up living in the United States for the rest of his life, where his academic position after he finishes his PhD is

'everything [he] has ever dreamed of'

while for thirty-three years her life, and particularly their family life, is nothing like what she wants it to be.

Lacking agency:-



Lacking agency, the female protagonist in each novel participates in a diasporic community which provides support for wives who share their displacement and dependency. After her initial loneliness, Nazneen in Brick Lane enjoys the company of other Bangladeshi women on the council estate, despite her husband's disapproval of her best friend Razia. Similarly, in The Namesake:

“The [Bengali] bachelors fly back to Calcutta one by one, returning with wives... The wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp that's sold in Chinatown, that it's possible to make halwa with Cream of Wheat. The families drop by one another's homes on Sunday afternoons.”

However, it is suggested in Brick Lane that if the diasporic community can be a source of support, it can also act as a means of limitation and restriction, particularly for women, who are policed much more closely than men. Indeed, despite Nazneen's propriety and submissiveness, especially in the early years, her husband restricts her mobility and activities, ostensibly because of what people in the Bangladeshi community will say about her:

She did not often go out. ‘Why should you go out?’ said Chanu. ‘If you go out, ten people will say, “I saw her walking on the street.” And I will look like a fool.’

Reinforced Clothing:

This visibility and heightened scrutiny of women in both diasporic communities is reinforced by their clothing. In both novels the wives wear traditional South Asian clothing while the men's clothing is more 'westernized'. The contradictory and often coercive nature of female clothing as cultural display is emphasized in Brick Lane, where Chanu directs his daughters to wear different types of clothing on different days. What the girls wore each day 'depended where Chanu directed his outrage':

If he had a Lion Hearts leaflet in his hand, he wanted his daughters covered. He would not be cowed by these Muslim-hating peasants. If he saw some girls go by in hijab he became agitated at this display of peasant ignorance. Then the girls went out in their skirts.

This situation reinforces Neluka Silva's point about the female body being 'the terrain on which [group] distinctions are made visible' (23).

Generational Differences And Conflicts Over Diasporic Identities And Gender Ideologies:



Both novels also call attention to generational differences and conflicts over diasporic identities and gender ideologies. In Brick Lane Nazneen and Chanu have two daughters, one of whom complies with Chanu's efforts to educate them about Bengali culture, while the other actively rebels against all efforts to indoctrinate her as a conventional Bangladeshi girl. In The Namesake the situation of second-generation female immigrants is more fully explored through the character Moushumi, who marries Ashima's son:

"From earliest girlhood, she says, she had been determined not to allow her parents to have a hand in her marriage. She had always been admonished not to marry an American, as had he, but he gathers that in her case these warnings had been relentless, and had therefore plagued her far more than they had him."

This is in keeping with the observation by many scholars and casual observers that in the homeland as well as in the diaspora, females tend to be under more pressure than males to maintain what is taken to be 'cultural purity'. It is worth emphasizing, however, that in reality no culture is ever pure or monolithic, but always diverse, multifaceted, and full of internal contradictions. Nira Yuval-Davis has argued that gender relations are at the heart of cultural debates and that social reproduction is central to cultural continuity.

Irene Gedalof has further pointed out that it is the female body's capacity for birth that makes women crucial to the preservation of a particular community's integrity and purity. In addition, women's responsibility for the organization of the home and the socialization of children makes them crucial in cultural – as well as biological – reproduction. For this reason, cultural control over women is fundamental to the continuity of tradition and community identity. These considerations, I would suggest, are particularly prominent in diasporic situations, and individual females respond to the heightened cultural pressures in various ways. At university, Moushumi majored in French because:

"Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge – she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever."

Thus Moushumi finds a way of partially escaping the conflicting cultural claims inherent in a diasporic identity. Her mother-in-law, the reluctant diasporic subject who moves back to India after 33 years, has to admit to herself that 'She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband.' (279) Brick Lane, by contrast, ends with Nazneen's insistence on keeping herself and her daughters in Britain when her husband moves back to Bangladesh. So, despite the strong cultural pressures on all of the major female diasporic characters in these novels, despite their constructed dependency, despite their internal conflicts and ambivalences, it is ultimately their individual choices which shape their identities and destinies. The implication is that the pressures arising from conflicts over



gender ideologies in diasporic situations can be transformative as well as challenging, and that the outcome depends perhaps more on the individual responses than on the conditions themselves.

In the character of Anil Tissera, Ondaatje inscribes a cultural formation that could, in many ways, be described as postmodern, in that she transgresses the conventional notions of identity and boundaries of gender and position. Anil Tissera occupies a "dis-located" position, in terms of her name, her nationality and her family; in problematizing notions of individual identity, Ondaatje explores the concept of "Self" as something constructed, and yet whole and realizable. She had been given two entirely inappropriate names and very early began to desire "Anil" which was her brother's unused second name. She had tried to buy it from him when she was twelve years old, offering to support him in all family arguments.

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