

IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE OUTLOOK OF MONICA ALI'S *BRICK LANE*, AND ANDREA LEVY'S *SMALL ISLAND*

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Abstract: In this research paper, the author is going to explore the marital estrangement in the outlook of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island*. It depicts the status of women in the family and society in the context of British women in the present-day scenario. Prominent British feminist writers Monica Ali and Andrea Levy present the woman in various dimensions, which is also discussed in this paper. It is also highlighted how women are discriminated against and exploited due to various influences in the works of these writers. This research paper also focuses on the most important aspect of women and their dilemmas in the struggles in their marital relationships, which affected their professional lives. To analyse woman exploitation and discrimination, the role of women in families, and their societal relationships with men, the researcher has taken the works of Monica Ali and Andrea Levy. The theme of dissolution of marriage in *Small Island* by Andrea Levy is intricately portrayed through the troubled relationships between the central couples, particularly Queenie and Bernard and Gilbert and Hortense. Their unions reveal how personal, racial, and societal conflicts erode intimacy and mutual understanding.

Key words: identity crisis, frustration, self-emancipation, family relationship

Introduction

Woman writers have emerged from the thought of writing about the problems and prospects of women. Works of many feminist writers are running in the point of view of merging autobiographical elements with fantasy. The novel's story centers on the female characters. It is also an explication of how the woman faces the challenges in her life. The success and unsuccess of the woman and her dilemmas in certain contexts, their exploitation, and their relationship with men between pre- and post-marital life are the great concerns in the novels of the major women writers. Similarly, Monica Ali has portrayed many women characters in her novels. Andrea Levy also explores the woman through her novels. In *Small Island*, Andrea Levy explores the dissolution of marriage through emotional estrangement, cultural dislocation, and wartime trauma. The relationship between Queenie and Bernard is marked by silence and emotional repression. When Bernard returns from the war, Queenie sees, "He was looking at me like I'd come to his house to rob it" Their detachment serves to emphasize the void of closeness in their relationship. Bernard is severely impacted by the war and cannot accept Queenie's individuality and frankness, detaching from her and creating distance in their marriage. The marriage of Gilbert and Hortense provides a parallel, structurally speaking, as both experience a sense of disillusionment relating to society's cultural norms and the apparent dreams that aren't attained. Hortense expects England to be the refined utopia she envisioned, and she is disappointed by both her country and her husband. She says, "You are not the man I thought you were". The way her marriage is collapsing emotionally before it can even stabilize suggests that their marital expectations were founded in fantasy. Levy too implies the shift towards the possibility of renewal, as respect begins to develop between Gilbert and Hortense. The loss between Bernard and Queenie, in contrast, appears permanent, as Queenie's final act, giving up her mixed-race child as a product of her relationship outside of marriage, symbolically captures the penultimate fracture. Through the stories Levy shares in her thematic development, she envisions marriage as a convergence where both personal and societal tensions tend to butt up against each other and collapse, allowing for disillusionment emotionally, if not legally.

Frustration in the life of a married woman

In Brick Lane, Monica Ali powerfully presents the frustration experienced by married women through the lives of sisters Nazneen and Hasina, both of whom face emotional confinement, social pressure, and personal disillusionment within patriarchal systems. Nazneen, married off to the older and self-absorbed Chanu, begins her married life in London with quiet resignation, believing her fate must be endured. Her inner turmoil erupts when she feels like she is caught between her obligation and her desires: "She was tired of waiting. Waiting for Chanu to change. Waiting for herself to change". The tension between gendered obligation and free agency can only build up in frustration as she is weighed down by her obligations to manage a household, to be lonely, and to be a submissive wife in a relationship where she is not really seen or heard at all, while they can stand as her husband's woman. Hasina, on the other hand, vociferously rebels, chasing a romantic notion of love as she elopes, only to become an object of exploitation and abuse by men who consume her and discard her as they deem. The letters from Dhaka are steeped in pain and 'emotional fatigue.' She writes that "One man beat me. One man throws me out. One man only wants body. Always I must run" . Even though her path diverges from Nazneen's, Hasina's experiences provide another form of marital frustration - a form of marital trouble steeped in instability and punishment by a society that attempts to control female independence. However, with these two women's experiences, Ali critiques how marriage, especially within rigid gender roles, remains a site of unrealized ambition, erased selfhood, and continual emotional toil for women.

Andrea Levy captures the frustrating subtleties of everything married women deal with in Small Island, with the emotional isolation, broken dreams, and constraints of a society that limits their power. I think the characters Hortense and Queenie sum it up best. Hortense enters marriage with Gilbert with a contextual background framed by colonial attitudes and an imagined view of England and marriage that is dignifying, respectable, and elevating...and does not expect more when marrying Gilbert. That expectation quickly turns to disillusionment as she marries Gilbert and finds herself in a cold, cramped room with someone she barely knows. Hortense ultimately expresses her growing frustration, saying, "This England. This life. It was not what I dreamed it to be", evincing the inherent frustration of a woman whose imagined view of a better life has collapsed. Affection and esteem are not present at the start of her marriage, indicating her emotional distance from Gilbert. Likewise, Queenie's marriage to Bernard becomes a place of quiet despair. She marries him to stop being poor and alone in the country, not out of love. The war creates emotional distance, not closeness. When he returns home, Queenie refers to Bernard as a stranger, saying, "He looked at me as if I was a stranger who had broken into his house." The affair with Michael Roberts and the birth of a child outside of marriage represent her desire for emotional and physical satisfaction—needs that were not met in her marriage. Both women, constrained by the roles of gender, race, and class, illustrate how marriage is not a place of security or happiness in their lives. Rather, both women find marriage to be a space of suppressed frustration and silent suffering.

Identity Crisis

The identity crisis theme is especially prevalent in Brick Lane by Monica Ali and Small Island by Andrea Levy, where female protagonists struggle with fractured selves through culture, history, and societal expectations. Outside of issues of culture, history, and identity, Nazneen in Brick Lane has been conditioned to not protest her fate according to cultural "tradition" What could not be changed must be borne." Residing in London, Nazneen embodies the role of a traditional Bengali wife. She endorses her expected role as a dutiful Bengali wife but has a fracture between where she is from (her values) and the freedoms that are offered in her new place. A painful re-evaluation of self is at the heart of these narrative arcs. Her relationship with Karim and eventual choice to remain independent signal a decisive transformation from passivity to agency: "She would live. She would make it." "What couldn't be changed must be borne, the usual reply to return to accept her proverbial incarceration." Through lived experience, thoughtful reflection, and her final rejection of her husband and lover, Nazneen reclaims copious authorship over her own life: "She would live. She would make it." "Her emancipation was not key moments of dramatic rebelliousness but everyday acts of choice, responsibility, and dignity."

In Small Island, Andrea Levy delves into the concept of identity crisis embodied through Hortense, a Jamaican woman whose identity is challenged by the dissonance between her preconceived notions of

Britain and the stark truth she experiences. Hortense has lived her life with colonial assumptions that England is the "mother country," a source of civility, a bastion of prestige, and a land of opportunity. With her education and intelligence, she believed she had the upper hand on most of her peers and arrived in London prepared to be accepted into the world of British civility. Yet, when she gets to London, the perceived civilization and opportunity are nowhere to be found; she's faced with poverty, racism, and social invisibility. Her shock is clear when she views her new home: "This dirty little room. This is England. This life. It was not what I dreamed it to be." Hortense's identity stems from the colonial heritage of ideals associated with Britain's ethnicity and a sense of class-prospect pride. As Hortense's crisis unfolds, her precarious colonial identity is dismantled before her as she recognizes she isn't seen as British but as an outsider. Hortense's anxiety deepens as she re-evaluates her previously unquestioned marriage to Gilbert, leading to a broader reconsideration of her identity as a woman and her place in society. Throughout the turmoil connected to this painful disillusionment, Hortense methodically reassembles a more layered and realistic identity not based on mirage or illusion, but rather on new engagement with people and society. Levy harnesses Hortense's catastrophic transformation to explain how the experiences of migration, displacement, and racial discrimination compel the rethinking of identity, especially for those who have been tactically socialized in colonial terms.

In the novel *Small Island*, Andrea Levy depicts Queenie's identity crisis as she navigates the issues of social class, morality, and personal aspirations and fantasies after World War II Britain. Queenie does everything she can to escape her upbringing on a pig farm as a working-class person; as such, she marries Bernard for social security rather than love. However, post-war life starts to peel off the rough edges of her identity as a proper English woman, which she maintained during the war. Queenie's decision to offer refuge to the Jamaican tenants Gilbert and Hortense illustrates her differing lifestyle and beliefs compared to the rigid and racist attitudes of others, including Bernard's racist belief system and the self-affixed label of oneself being a realist. Queenie begins to identify with her identity as a landlord but more significantly as a woman caught between society's "good moral" expectations versus a deeper sense of morality and justice among the relations. Her identity crisis process reaches its apex with Michael Roberts, which develops into a relationship between a Black RAF airman and then the discovery that she had conceived a mixed-race child, leading her to confess to Bernard, "He's not your son. You know that don't you?", both her shame and strength in accepting a truth that disrupts established patterns. In the infant's acceptance by Gilbert and Hortense, Queenie's love reveals the conflict within herself between biological instincts, social stigma, and fatalistic realities of racial inequality to effectuate remarkable wrap-up. Face experiences through the novel contrast her complex society with another normative one. Queenie embodies this discretely to show how an interlocking methodology of race, class, and gender into mechanisms to change and undo cultural identity in an evolving Britain and society.

Self-Emancipation

In *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali and *Small Island* by Andrea Levy, the theme of women's emancipation is a strong undercurrent, as the protagonists of the works all, in varying degrees, learn how to shed the expectations that have been placed on them by patriarchy, tradition, and the requirement of societal performances.

In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali strongly demonstrates self-emancipation around the simultaneous yet foiled journeys of the two sisters, Nazneen and Hasina, both of whom journey to break free emotionally, socially, and psychologically from socially established norms of patriarchy and cultural expectations. Nazneen starts her London life in an arranged marriage with Chanu, accepting her mother's mantra: "What could not be changed must be borne".

Nazneen starts off as a passive, obedient woman also bound by duty. She lives a life shaped by obligation and responds to circumstance. However, she keeps gradually gaining her voice and identity through personal tragedy and motherhood, her affair with Karim, and the financial independence she gains from her sewing. When Nazneen rebels against both her old life and chooses to break away from Chanu and, ultimately, Karim, she asserts her emancipation through the decision. The crucial step she takes is for herself and her daughters. When she communicates her intention to stay, "This is my home", she creates

space both physically and emotionally, acknowledging that she doesn't have to choose either Karim's romantic entanglement or Chanu's planned journey back to Bangladesh. In contrast, Hasina's letters from Bangladesh tell an unsettling story of survival. After eloping for love, Hasina endures abuse, insecurity, instability, and exploitation from various forms of employment but nevertheless continues to reject returning to a state of submission. Hasina's enduring resilience and her own agency are testimony to her struggle for autonomy, as she refuses to be silenced permanently, even when faced with a dangerous world. While silence is understood to be a predetermined feature of her circumstances, success relies on the ongoing entanglement of contingent identities. Nazneen may have emancipated herself in a more pedestrian and substantive way, while Hasina does so through riskier and bolder gestures and forms of continuing movement and resistance. Ali's construction of emancipation depicts that self-emancipation can take various shapes and forms and that there are not always loud acts of liberation, but rather, it is always transformative.

In her novel *Small Island*, Andrea Levy explores the theme of self-emancipation through the journeys taken by Hortense and Queenie two women who sought to make their own autonomy and agency in the world in the midst of powerful structures of gender, class, and race, although their paths were very dissimilar. Horton arrived in England filled with goals of a more refined life, only to be confronted with races, minority status, poverty, and the disappointing realities of life. Initially defined by pride and colonial ideals, she learns the hard way that the world she saw for herself was obstructed; she learns to be resilient and, eventually, to be independent. Once she made a valuable choice to teach in a London school and build her own identity and life regardless of pervasive, systemic racism that characterizes British colonialism she began to change her realities. Late in the novel, Hortense displayed agency and exerted her autonomy in England she took ownership of her space and dignity by declaring to Gilbert, "I want to do something. I want to be someone." This moment represents her emancipation from structural limitations, the slavery of racism, and her own mistaken assumptions. Queenie's realities are quite different; she begins her journey as a working-class woman, aspiring to gain elevation and mobility via marriage. However, her emotional awakening is not rooted in her relationship with Bernard, as much as it prevails, but is actualized in her compassion towards her Black tenants and her emotional and sexual relationship with Michael Roberts. Queenie's greatest emancipation comes in her choice to surrender her mixed-race child, not as giving up but to relinquish her attempts at being an ideal mother in the face of her reality as a product of a society that adhered to rules of oppression. but as a rejection of societal hypocrisy. She tells Bernard, "You could never love him. Not properly", asserting her moral independence and recognizing her child's need for a more accepting future. Both women defy the passive roles assigned to them, choosing self-determination over societal compliance. Through the characters of Hortense and Queenie, Levy illustrates that self-emancipation is frequently achieved through personal struggle, emotional loss, and the audacity to challenge societal expectations.

Family relationship

In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali examines family relationships through the strong, emotional bond between Nazneen and Hasina, two sisters whose lives are separated by space but connected by shared history, yearning, and each other's support. Their relationship in the novel is developed almost entirely through Hasina's letters (which serve as a narrative device and lifeline for Nazneen). Though their lives are worlds apart (Nazneen trapped in an arranged marriage in London, Hasina finding herself surviving Dhaka after a thunderous elopement for love), the sisters continue to share an emotional intimacy. Nazneen absorbs the letters as reminders of her past, a past that is connected to her identity, beyond being a wife and a mother. Hasina's open experiences of her own struggles, often juxtaposed against Nazneen's silent inner world, involve Nazneen and provide bravery and reassurance. For example, Nazneen is inspired by Hasina's strength, and her own transformation happens gradually yet consistently. The sisters' relationship is tied to their memories of each other and an unspoken agreement about the constraints they face as women. Hasina's reflection in her letter, "I run away for love. You stay for duty. But we both fight", indicating that their family relationship creates an opportunity for reflection and solidarity. In this enduring relationship, Ali suggests that family, especially sisterhood, can provide emotional stability in a

world that feels unstable and uncontrollable, despite long distances separating women and their sisters, who are also women.

In *Small Island*, Andrea Levy utilizes the changing relationship between Hortense and Queenie to examine the theme of family relationship, not through kinship, but through shared womanhood, motherhood, and communal sense of duty. While Hortense and Queenie seem to start off so far apart we have Hortense, a dignified Jamaican schoolteacher shaped by colonial ideals, and then we have Queenie, a white working-class Englishwoman in post-war Britain trying to make sense of a world turned upside down by the war—they begin their relationship in tension, misunderstandings, and racial and cultural divides. Levy slowly demonstrates how even emotional qualities and ethical deeds can create dissimilar familial relationships. The turning point in their journey occurs when Queenie, having just given birth to a mixed-race child, whose biological father is Michael, decides that she cannot raise that child in a racist family with her husband, Bernard. She turns to Hortense and Gilbert and asks them to take the baby, saying to Hortense, “You could love him. I know that”. In this act, Queenie entrusts not only her child but also her hope for a better future to Hortense, symbolically uniting the two women in a profound maternal bond. Hortense’s decision to accept the child, despite her initial reservations, reflects a profound expression of empathy and an evolving sense of solidarity. This unlikely but deeply human bond allows Levy to challenge rigid definitions of family, revealing that kinship may be chosen and created by compassion, accountability, and lived experience.

Conclusion

Family relationships, identity crises, and women’s self-emancipation are trending topics in the feminist writings of British women. Writers like Monica Ali and Andrea Levy are the appropriate writers who explore this theme in their works *Brick Lane* and *Small Island*. Nazneen, Hasina, Hortense, and Queenie are the new women who protest both men, identity, marriage, and society, and finally, they are successful in their journey of life.

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