

# The Embodied *Sari* as Political, Personal and Transformative in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 16 Jan 2023; Received in revised form: 12 Feb 2023; Accepted: 19 Feb 2023; Available online: 27 Feb 2023</p> <p>©2023 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords</b>— <i>sari</i>, <i>Bengali immigrant women</i>, <i>diasporic identity</i>, <i>geography</i>, <i>affect</i>, <i>embodiment</i></p>	<p>There is a vast landscape for diasporic perspectives within contemporary South Asian literary discourse. Amidst such dialogue, it is imperative that we revisit the pioneering work of diasporic authors such as Monica Ali. Her novel, <i>Brick Lane</i> (2004), marks a compelling, nuanced portrayal of Bengali diasporic identity that shifts beyond the tendency to assign fixed labels, embracing instead the dynamic tensions and dissonance that diasporic identities bring. In presenting the subjectivities of various Bengali immigrant women, she highlights further the space for contrast even within this diasporic identity 'group'. I argue that the <i>sari</i> becomes an affective, embodied symbol of dynamism, geography, and feeling for Bengali immigrant women in the novel, representing simultaneous personal and political attachments that shift between characters and across time. I trace certain pivotal scenes within the narrative where the <i>sari</i> carries the subjectivities of its wearers, showcasing an affective capacity in South Asian garments to hold complex stories of place.</p>

## 1. Introduction

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2004) follows the life of its protagonist, Nazneen, as a Bengali immigrant who moves, newly married, to London. In chronicling Nazneen's interactions at home, with neighbors and friends, with strangers, and with culture on the whole, the novel engages deeply with themes of identity, nationality, and diaspora, outlining desires, duties, and tensions in the lives of Bengali women as immigrants. Within these dynamics, there exists a compelling relationship between dress, geography, and character subjectivity, demonstrated through the novel's third person narrative voice and the language in descriptions of Nazneen's encounters. Through a close reading of several scenes in *Brick Lane*, I highlight critically the narrative and symbolic significance of the *sari* and its shifting meanings. In doing so, I argue that 'dress' emerges as a crucial symbol of embodiment, tracing the Bengali immigrant woman's experience of identity negotiation.

First, I want to draw attention to the context within which the novel's characters express their subjectivity. Alistair Cormack (2006), in his article examining postcolonial subjectivity in *Brick Lane*, outlines a "double bind that female migrants face, treated as alien by their host nation and as commodities by the men in their own communities" (p.700). This 'double bind' contributes to a layered process of 'othering' in Bengali immigrant women, suggesting that their expressions of subjectivity and agency immediately occupy a space of deviance and even resistance. Furthermore, notions of 'othering' are further reflected through the geographical situation of Brick Lane, described by Jane Hiddleston (2005) as a "segregated space for the underprivileged... associated with stereotypes and myths of backwardness, delinquency and social nonconformity" (p.58) Here, the Bengali immigrant women living on Brick Lane, and their complex interactions with 'dress', offer alternative 'othered' perspectives on identity formation that deal with race, class, and gender.

## 2. The Bengali Diasporic Woman's Staggering Walk of Identity Negotiation

The *sari* is a recurring motif throughout the novel, worn by many of its characters. Naseem Akhter Hussain (2010) writes that the *sari* is a symbol of 'Bengali nationalism' (p.331). However, the uncertainty and shifts surrounding portrayals of the *sari* in *Brick Lane* serve to complicate such an assumption. The Bengali women in the novel have varying experiences with wearing *saris*, particularly considering their immigrant status. One instance marking the complex relationship between the *sari* and identity negotiation is that of Nazneen wandering through Brick Lane in the third chapter, when she impulsively leaves the house alone without telling her husband, "She bunched the skirts of her *sari* with one hand and took the steps two at a time until she missed a ledge and came down on her ankle against an unforgiving ridge." (Ali, 2004, p.77) Here, Nazneen's slow, intentional steps, followed by her helpless fall, imply a negotiated form of agency. The choice to set off on her clumsy, and even dangerous journey down the stairs and out onto Brick Lane signifies a larger moment of independence and subjectivity expression accompanied by the difficulties of her positionality within the aforementioned 'double bind'. She, in her *sari*, traverses Brick Lane not simply as a proud Bengali national, but with a multitude of feelings at play, "Nazneen, hobbling and halting, began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination. A leafshake of fear – or was it excitement? – passed through her legs." (p.80) The references to other forms of clothing, such as a 'coat' and 'suit', along with the 'white face', offer a list of features that connote a sense of belonging in London, highlighting an immigrant 'desire for unity' and 'the longing to inhabit a known and bounded space and to be possessed by a sole and unitary narrative' (Cormack, 2006, p.707). Nazneen, with her *sari* and 'brown' skin, becomes an 'alien' and is hyper-aware of her 'other-ness'. Moreover, while Nazneen embodies 'female flaner' - describing a 'woman walker' expressing her subjectivity by strolling through a city (Mouton, 2001, p.3) - her movement is awkward and painful. And alongside this discomfort and 'fear', there is also the possibility of 'excitement', showcasing a wide range of sentiments within the same scene.

The sentence that follows in the novel notes a shift in Nazneen's thought process from anxious self-awareness to a changed place of contentment, "But they were not aware of her. In the next instant she

knew it. They could not see her any more than she could see God... She enjoyed this thought." (Ali, 2004, p.80) Here, the unpredictable dynamics of being 'seen' and 'unseen' in an urban space and the varying feelings that emerge from this encounter further complicate the process of identity negotiation. Another complex shift arises when, despite the increasing discomfort Nazneen feels while walking with her injured ankle, she experiences a kind of liberation through being able to communicate with another South Asian man in English, "She had spoken, in English, to a stranger, and she had been understood and acknowledged. It was very little. But it was something." (p.86) At this point, it is important to consider that, although Nazneen navigates her subjectivity whilst in her *sari*, she also finds solace and feels a sense of belonging and 'understanding' in the English language, associated with her place of living, rather than her national place of origin. These shifting thoughts, feelings, and movements bring to light an uncertain, conflicted space that Bengali women immigrants navigate themselves within, in the process of identity formation and subjectivity expression.

Later that evening, after Nazneen returns home, she washes the *sari* she spent the day in, "When she had twisted the water out of it, she left it in the bath like a sleeping pink python." (p.86) The metaphor of the 'pink python' reinforces a sense of danger in identity negotiation and expressions of female subjectivity that are now tied to the *sari*. Through this encounter, the *sari* transcends its materiality as a garment, now representing what Jennifer Leetsch (2021) describes as "affective renderings of embodied migratory experience" (p.693). The term 'affective' emphasizes notions of uncertainty and 'in-between-ness' in the immigrant experience that break binaries. Rather than remaining in fixed categories, Nazneen's identity is constructed through a "dialogue between the narration of her origin and the reality of the history through which she lives." (Cormack, 2006, p.702)

## 3. Plural Embodiments of Belonging in the Sari

Although the novel's third person realist narrative follows Nazneen's interaction with *saris* the most, the encounters of other characters offer further insight on the idea of 'dialogue' and uncertainty in identity negotiation for Bengali immigrant women. Nazneen's neighbor, Mrs Islam, who is set in her ways, embodies the *sari* in a way that reflects her rigidity, "Winter and summer she wore the same thing: a cardigan over a *sari*, black socks, carpet slippers. She would not

*change for the seasons. They did not bend to her and she would not bend to them.*" (Ali, 2004, p.123) Mrs Islam is also shown to be particularly judgemental towards those who associate with people of other cultures, "But if you mix with all these people, even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs." (p.43) While her character's embodiment appears to associate with the 'Bengali nationalist' stereotype, the narrative choice to place Mrs Islam in close proximity and regularly in direct contact with characters such as Nazneen and Razia provides an interplay of contrast and 'dialogue' that further contributes to these women's identity negotiation. Razia, another neighbor and close friend of Nazneen's, embodies the *sari* entirely differently to the others. She feels uncomfortable in them, "The folds were never right: too bunched, too loose, too far to the side, too low or too high. Razia would look better in overalls. Overalls would match her big shoes" (p.69-70) The repetition of the word 'too' implies a constant irritation and unnecessary excess in the way the *sari* feels on Razia's body, while the idea of overalls 'matching' her shoes implies a kind of belonging. Later, Razia replaces the *sari* with West-associated forms of clothing, "She would never, so she said, wear a *sari* again." (p.134) In doing this, along with other acts such as learning English, Razia associates herself with a stereotype opposing the 'Bengali nationalist' and 'assimilating' with 'Western' culture in London. These alternate portrayals demonstrate plurality in Bengali women immigrants' experiences with 'dress', emphasizing difference in the embodiment of the *sari*, rather than portraying it as an oversimplified single-meaning symbol. This multiplicity adds nuance to our understanding of Bengali immigrant women's identity negotiation, which becomes simultaneously the 'delirium of the multiple' as well as the 'refusal of multiplicity' and 'desire for unity' (Cormack, 2006, p.707).

#### 4. The Sari as a Home for the 'Uncertain, Unstable, and Alternative' Stories of the Other

The ending of the novel also involves the *sari*, heightening its narrative significance as a conclusive motif. Nazneen, her two daughters, and Razia visit the ice rink together, to go skating for the first time. The ice rink itself is a recurring symbol for desire and freedom - one that Nazneen encounters first on TV and then mainly in her imagination. In her first experience, she is 'held' by the screen and watches a man, wearing a 'very tight suit' and a woman 'in a skirt

that did not even cover her bottom' skate together (Ali, 2004, p.53). She is drawn to the woman in particular, who dances as if she has 'conquered everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who [slides] over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her' (p.53). Here, the movement of the woman skater's body symbolizes a colossal kind of freedom that defies 'laws of nature'. This freedom is performed on screen by two bodies that wear tight, revealing clothes. About this scene, Cormack (2006) states, "The female figure represents everything that Nazneen is not: she dominates nature, the opposite sex, and her own body." (p.709) At various points in the novel, Nazneen gazes after this 'free alternate self', increasingly noticing women in miniskirts and even trying to pull up her own skirt to emulate them, "Walking over the bedspread, she imagined herself swinging a handbag like the white girls." (Ali, 2004, p.197) Here, her expressions of subjectivity and identity negotiation follow a desire for conformity to 'Western' culture in the hope that it is synonymous with freedom. However, it is not in these moments that Nazneen finds her 'free alternate self', but in more complex ones, such as when she dances to an English song on the radio in her *sari*, "The music broke in waves over her entire body... She turned and kicked, turned and kicked, jumped and kicked and her foot went over her head." (p.685) Here, Nazneen embodies the freedom she witnesses, imaginatively defying laws of nature with movement that is urgent, intense, all-consuming, and euphoric. But she carries her *sari* with her while she moves. In this manner, it represents more than a Bengali nationality and interacts with her diasporic identity, affectively embodying multiple geographies whilst holding a specific origin. Towards the end, within the ice rink, the *sari* embodies the changed and negotiated materialization of an originally distant fantasy of freedom, allowing Nazneen to embrace her identity as unstable and 'alternative'.

Jennifer Leetsch (2021) writes, "The *sari* garment is utilized to make visible and graspable stories." (p.693) *Brick Lane* weaves 'dress' incessantly into its narratives, with one particular storyline following the eventual startup of a sewing business, shared by Nazneen and Razia. The *sari*, in particular, is represented as intimately connected with its wearer, and between wearers alike, showcasing the threads of identity formation in a complex entanglement, rather than in easily boxable categories and binaries. The language of movement, danger, and uncertainty tied to encounters with *saris* within the novel recognizes an affective potential in portraying perspectives of the

'other' and imaginations of the 'alternative'. In doing so, it proves to be a powerful embodied symbol for identity negotiation in Bengali immigrant women that raises questions and blurs boundaries between the 'East' and the 'West'.

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