



LUND UNIVERSITY

Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology

Centre for Languages and Literature

No (Wo)man's Land:
The Making of a Room of One's Own in
Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

Wallentin Richardsson
ENGK01
Degree project in English Literature
VT 2019
Centre for Languages and Literature
Lund University
Supervisor: Cian Duffy

Abstract

In this essay, I uncover and examine a number of different strategies applied toward self-realization in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003). I filter Ali's modern day bildungsroman through the lens of Virginia Woolf's understanding of self-realization as a gendered process as well as through Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory. I argue that Nazneen, the protagonist of the novel, is subject to a binary understanding of gender that fuels a construction of women as inferior. Furthermore, the dominant Western culture pressures Nazneen to see herself through the eyes of the British. However, inside this skewed power structure, Nazneen actively seeks out activities in which to lose herself. By experiencing moments of life while not thinking about her sex or her ethnicity, she sporadically transcends the otherwise impeding social structure. *Brick Lane* is consequently a vivid portrait of self-discovery in the modern era containing an 'other' that is not only a victim, but also an agent, within a skewed power structure.

Keywords:

The Self and Society/Emancipation/Gender/Hybridity/Androgyny

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Women In Society	3
Fatalism & Agency	7
Action & Reaction	10
Losing Yourself To Find Yourself	14
Conclusion	18
Works Cited	19

Introduction

What is it to be truly free? And how does one get there? The quest to find, or realize, one's true self is an old one, chronicled by novels often categorized as 'bildungsroman'. The bildungsroman, which arose in eighteenth-century Germany, is characterized by a focus on the self in relation to society. It typically depicts the process by which the protagonist, traditionally a man, comes into his own. The andro- and Eurocentric protagonist of the traditional bildungsroman has, however, as a result of the feminist and postcolonial movement of the 1960s and 70s, been forced to share shelf space with novels portraying female and non-white protagonists. In fact, the feminist bildungsroman is arguably the most popular form of feminist fiction (Feng 9). By depicting protagonists who are not white men, feminist and postcolonial writers approach the theme of identity and character development from a new vantage point. In doing so, the invisible hand of cultural norms – invisible to those not subjugated to them – can be uncovered. Novels such as Silvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1966) and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) are notable while Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is arguably the most conspicuous example of how new subjects yield new insights on the construction of identity.

Virginia Woolf is recognized as “the architect of female space” (Showalter 264). She “dominated the imaginative territory of the English woman novelist” (Showalter 265) of the twentieth century and her ideas on sexual identity have influenced later generations of novelists as well as the field of gender studies. Woolf's essay ‘A Room of One's Own’ (1929) deals with the gendered nature of emancipation and self-realization – how men and women face different challenges in life depending on their gender. In her inimitably impressionistic style of prose, Woolf uncovers social stratification and a skewed power structure that characterized, and, in many respects, still characterizes Western society. She highlights how access to certain means, specifically financial independence, personal space and time for idleness and leisure, are essential for one's opportunity to express one's true self. In line with Sheheryar B. Sheik, I read Woolf's ‘room’ to refer to a metaphysical space as well as the physical room enabling privacy for women. Having a room of one's own is, consequently, to be understood as having the “means of escaping the patriarchal stronghold” (Sheik 20).

In this essay, I aim to uncover and examine the different strategies applied toward making a room of one's own in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. The novel depicts ‘outsiders’, characters socially constructed as ‘the other’, and their attempts to realize themselves within a foreign, and radically different, country and culture. While this essay mainly concerns the development and maturation of the protagonist, Nazneen, other

characters of the novel, her husband Chanu in particular, will also be discussed in order to shed light on different strategies toward self-realization.

Brick Lane, Ali's debut novel, revolves around Nazneen, an eighteen-year old Bangladeshi girl, who is sent off to London to enter an arranged marriage with Chanu, a Bangladeshi expatriate twice her age chosen for her by her father. For Nazneen, arriving in London means starting over. She is torn between the strict gender roles, fatalism and silent stoicism she has been brought up to adhere to and the open-endedness of the exciting but potentially risky metropolis. Chanu, who had high hopes for life in London when he arrived, becomes increasingly alienated and indignant as he grapples with failed expectations and wrestles the systemic racism of British society. As a way of raising funds to pay for relocating the family to Bangladesh, Chanu sets Nazneen up to work as a seamstress. Nazneen is ambivalent to the idea of going back and soon gets romantically involved with Karim, a passionate Islamic activist who provides her with clothes to mend. The combination of having lost her first-born son, being in financial difficulties due to Chanu getting them in debt, and her inner struggle to balance her extramarital affair with her religious beliefs, leads to Nazneen having a nervous breakdown. As she recovers, she begins to stand up for herself and, although startled by her own agency, embrace the freedom of not knowing what the future has in store for her. In the end, Chanu goes back to Bangladesh alone and Nazneen ends the relationship with Karim. She stays in London with her two daughters and continues to work as a seamstress but now as a part of a women's collective led by her best friend, Razia.

Nazneen's way of 'sculpting' her life, removing the parts that she does not want, instead of painting it by numbers, makes for a vivid portrait of self-discovery in the modern era. I will argue that it is only in the sporadic moments when Nazneen forgets the expectations tightly connected to her gender and ethnicity that she is able to truly make a room of her own. The only way for Nazneen to find herself is thus to lose herself in the moment. This reading of the novel brings forth an 'other' that is not only a victim, but also an agent within a skewed power structure. By fully devoting herself to an activity she loves, she is able to transcend the otherwise impeding, patriarchal social structure.

In addition to the gender perspective provided by Woolf's essay, I filter *Brick Lane* through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory. More specifically, I apply Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry and sly civility in an attempt to factor in ethnicity as I examine the development and maturation of Nazneen and Chanu. Bhabha's non-binary, deconstructionist, way of understanding identity lends itself to intersectional analysis – how gender identity intersects with ethnicity, class and other social factors – while still

acknowledging human agency. In this essay, I will primarily focus on gender and, to some extent, ethnicity. An all-encompassing intersectional analysis, however interesting such an approach would be, is beyond the scope of this essay.

Women In Society

The quest to define the self in relation to society is the underlying plot of the majority of novels written by women in the nineteenth-century (Gilbert and Gubar 76). Pivotal novels such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871) all have a woman trying to write her own story at the center of the narrative. The female protagonists are up against societal expectations of what a woman should be and do. By negotiating and, at times, wrestling this skewed social structure they nevertheless succeed in holding their own, and their stories can consequently be seen as early models of female emancipation. The novels by Brontë, Austen and Eliot are typical examples of what Elaine Showalter calls the 'feminine phase' of women's literature. These novels typically explore "the daily lives and values of women within the family and the community" (Showalter 29). While expanding the spectrum of 'printable' aspects of the female experience, female writers during this phase wrote largely in line with their male literary predecessors and adopted the values and literary traits of the dominant tradition (Showalter 20).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a contemporary of Virginia Woolf, presents a more radical approach toward female emancipation in her utopian novel, *Herland* (1915). *Herland* is representative of what Showalter calls the 'feminist phase' of women's literature in that it presents a "flight from the male world to a culture defined in opposition to the male tradition" (Showalter 4). The novel tells the story of three men embarking on an expedition to a land inhabited by women alone. They are captured and find themselves in an autonomous female community characterized by collectivism, pragmatism and a symbiotic relationship to nature. This new, and radically different, social structure leaves the men in a liminal state and challenges the logic by which they have viewed themselves in relation to society. In *Herland*, Gilman extols traits that rhyme with the traditionally feminine. The women are tightly intertwined with nature, peaceful, caring, and above all: mothers. Instead of envisioning a 'primary womanhood', where women are free to define their own culture and purpose, Gilman perpetuates the gender binary by constructing femininity only in relation to masculinity. Her novel can therefore be seen both as a protest against the prevailing

patriarchy and as a failed experiment with the idea of women trying to bypass a patriarchal social structure in order for them to live as they would have lived if men were not a variable to take into consideration.

Virginia Woolf expands on this – the idea of separating oneself from the confinement of societal expectations and cultural norms in order to realize one’s true self – without forming an autonomous female community in ‘A Room of One’s Own’. The essay can be read as a meditation on how gender conditions one’s possibility to unimpededly express oneself. Woolf argues that women are being locked out – denied access to certain sectors of society – as well as locked in – assumed to have certain skills (25). She points to how intellectual freedom depends upon material conditions and how women are systematically denied access to money that could provide the fertile soil needed for the mind to bloom (106). Furthermore, Woolf notes how the history of women is missing, how writers of history books have failed to include detailed descriptions of the battle of raising four children while cooking and cleaning and mediating relationships and remembering birthdays. The fact that the past has been filtered through a gender-biased lens has left us with a lopsided history that leaves women feeling insignificant, deprived of tradition and role models, as if they are living in a vacuum (89).

Woolf stresses how life for both sexes is “arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusions as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself” (Woolf 36). The more self-confidence one has, the more likely one is to feel entitled to all of life’s rewards: friendships, romantic relationships, gratifying work and idle time to enjoy a meal or a starlit night sky. Self-confidence is not portioned out equally at birth. It is not rationed out from the cradle to the grave. Instead, Woolf argues, self-confidence is generated “by thinking that other people are inferior to oneself” (Woolf 36). This imagined innate superiority can be built upon wealth, rank, education or any other aspect of life that might justify this stratification of people with oneself on top. Woolf’s focus is on how gender is used in this regard and she puts forth that men create, and justify, their position in power by constructing women as inferior: “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size“ (Woolf 37). It is not the case that all men hold grudges against women per se. Instead the constructed inferiority of women should be understood to serve a higher purpose. Namely, women fill one slot of a binary pair and if they were not thought of as inferior they would seize to enlarge men.

The binary relationship between men and women, the way of seeing the sexes as distinctly different from each other, is, according to Woolf, not a result of inherent and

essential differences between the sexes. Instead, it is a result of our human need to define ourselves (Woolf 96). Woolf argues that the human mind is androgynous by nature (97). Instead of understanding masculinity and femininity to stem from biological differences between the sexes, Woolf sees the gender binary as a result of an ongoing and active effort in which one represses certain sides of oneself in order to stabilize an identity and ‘freeze’ a state of mind in which one is one thing only, either a man or a woman. This understanding of identity distinguishes sex from gender and stresses how gender is performed rather than biological – a radical thought at the time, that predates what Simone de Beauvoir would say twenty years later: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 301) as well as the theory of gender performativity disseminated by Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990).

The ultimate goal in terms of self-realization is, according to Woolf, to reach a state of mind in which one represses nothing (96). Consequently, she sees it as confining to live life thinking about your sex. Not only is this outlook confining for women who respond to male dominance by being submissive and docile but also for women who try to revolt against patriarchal oppression. By reacting, instead of acting, women lose sight of their real selves and live life only in relation to men: “She was saying this by way of aggression, or that by way of conciliation. She was admitting that she was ‘only a woman’, or protesting that she was ‘as good as a man’” (Woolf 74).

The ugly truth is that “there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women” (Woolf 112) – a call for androgyny, or ‘genderlessness’, that may sound terrifying, liberating or confining depending on how one interprets it. Showalter reads Woolf’s call for genderlessness as a defensive flight into androgyny (285). She argues that androgyny “was the myth that helped her evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness” (Showalter 264). In line with Toril Moi, I read Woolf’s androgynous version of female aestheticism as her way of transcending “the falsifying metaphysical nature” (Moi 13) of the gender binary. Consequently, Woolf does not argue for an escape from womanhood but rather for an escape from being a woman on men’s terms. She is not encouraging women to withdraw from the world. Instead, I read ‘A Room of One’s Own’ as Woolf’s way of urging us all to connect with the world directly, without any mental intermediaries.

The turn inwards to explore one’s own identity is the defining trait of the novels that make up Showalter’s third phase of women’s literature, the ‘female tradition’ (33). The female tradition is a step toward “a separatist literature of inner space” (Showalter 33). Women writing in the female tradition, such as Virginia Woolf, distinguish themselves from previous generations of female novelists by neither reproducing the values and literary traits

of the male tradition or directly protesting against them. Instead, they try to disengage with a world that they see as polarized by sex and create a female aesthetic outside of this ‘binary cage’ (Showalter 34). Novels written in the female tradition, accordingly, revolve around self-discovery, a theme that is front and center in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*.

In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen is oscillating between her Bangladeshi cultural heritage and the secular lifestyle showcased by westerners in London. In order to make sense of how not only her gender but also her ethnicity affects her ability to make a room of her own, I apply Homi K. Bhabha’s postcolonial theory. Bhabha takes his cue from the scholarly work of Edward Said. Said argues, in his pivotal *Orientalism* (1979), that the Western world, ‘the Occident’, holds a certain mindset toward the East, ‘the Orient’. This Western discourse, this way of understanding the world, which is by no means objective, is projected onto ‘the Orient’ in an attempt to control it (Said 95). ‘Orientalism’ can consequently be understood as “the subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture” (Said 69). While sharing Said’s stress on discursive power, Bhabha distances himself from his precursor by his different conception of identity and the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Said sees this relationship as binary, where one is needed in order for the other to exist. In this view, identity can only be understood negatively. Bhabha, on the other hand, stresses the fluid and performative nature of identity and argues that “it is not the colonialist Self or the colonized Other but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial identity” (Bhabha 64). Consequently, the effect of colonial power is in its production of ‘hybridization’ (Bhabha 160). Bhabha uses this term – hybridity – to refer to the ambivalence of the colonized, how the subjugated hover between submission on their own terms and acquiescence to authority (156). The presence, and pressure, of colonial power can thus consequently be understood to produce a multitude of ‘others’ along the spectrum of hybridity. However, the effect of the colonizer’s claim to social authority is not unilateral. Hybridity also “reverses the effects of colonial disavowal, so that other denied knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange its authority” (Bhabha 162). In other words, when the colonized appropriate the culture of the colonizer they mediate it through their own values, which destabilizes the ‘ownership’ of that culture and thereby the authority of the colonizer. ‘Englishness’ can therefore not be understood as the property of the English, since ‘Englishness’ does not exist.

The concept of mimicry refers to how the colonized subject imitates the colonizer as an effect of the pressure exerted by the dominant culture (Bhabha 122). When the colonized engage in mimicry they constitute a “reformed, recognizable Other that is almost

the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 122). Mimicry can thereby be seen as a code of conduct, a way for the colonized to access power by copying the behavior of the colonizer.

By intentionally mediating the colonizer’s moral and cultural norms through their own values – for instance by mashing up a certain aspect of the colonizer’s behavior with local customs – the colonized perform what Bhabha terms sly civility (99). The colonized both agree – perform civility – and refuse – perform slyness – to mirror the colonizer. The performance of sly civility is a case in point for the ‘double consciousness’ that Bhabha argues permeates the colonial situation. Instead of a rebellion against the colonizer, which would suggest a binary power struggle between essentially different cultures, sly civility should be understood as a means for the colonized to live inside, and make use of, a skewed power structure.

Fatalism & Agency

Nazneen is brought up to wait and see – to accept her fate: “What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed everything had to be borne” (Ali 16). This fatalistic outlook on life follows Nazneen like a shadow when she first arrives in London. She spends her first years in the metropolis almost exclusively inside the apartment in Tower Hamlets, a poor neighborhood in East London mostly inhabited by Bangladeshi immigrants. Having grown up with her parents and sister, Hasina, in the small but vibrant Bangladeshi village of Gouripur, Nazneen is used to most matters being dealt with in public and the sense of community this culture entails. In London she, in contrast, finds “everyone in their boxes, counting their possessions” (Ali 24). She is lonely and feels alien, trapped physically as well as in the image Chanu paints of her as an “unspoilt girl from the village” (Ali 22). Nazneen had imagined that he would be grateful to have her as his wife. Instead, he treats her as a means to an end. He describes her in terms of being a “good worker” (Ali 23) and with hips wide enough to carry children (Ali 23). She is his ticket to a respectable family life. Chanu does not forbid Nazneen to leave the apartment but rather informs her of the price she, and more importantly, he will pay if she goes against purdah, the religious practice of female seclusion (Ali 45). The omniscient narrator of the novel puts it perfectly: “Life made its pattern around and beneath and through her” (Ali 40).

Nazneen is ambivalent toward the fatalism with which she has been indoctrinated. She sees it not only as a shadow but also as a retreat. By referring to the will of God, she takes herself out of the equation and finds not only powerlessness but also solace.

By applying her mother's strategy of not asking for or expecting anything, she shields herself from possible disappointment. But, however hard she tries, she cannot shake the "nameless thing that crawled across her shoulders and nested in her hair and poisoned her lungs, that made her both restless and listless" (Ali 102). The voice asking her what she wants will not be silenced and, consequently, the solid ground of fatalism starts to quake and crack under her feet.

Nazneen's development in the first part of the novel goes hand in hand with how she perceives the 'tattoo lady' – a middle-aged, unemployed white woman covered with tattoos – who lives across the street from her and spends her days at the window, drinking. At first, Nazneen praises the tattoo lady's detachment, her being "indifferent to the kindness of others" (Ali 18), but as time goes by Nazneen starts to question her passivity: "How can she just sit and sit? What is she waiting for? What is there to see?" (Ali 87). Nazneen's revised understanding of the tattoo lady's inaction reflects her own changing attitude toward the simmering feeling of powerlessness that she has cursed, and cherished, from day one. Now, she starts questioning her own meekness. She starts to redirect the blame for her suffering from God to herself and by starting to accept responsibility for her own life, Nazneen takes her first steps out of the shadow of fatalism that has functioned as much as a safe haven as a cage.

In a conversation with Mrs. Islam, the self-appointed know-it-all and usurer of the Bangladeshi community, Nazneen learns that agency is not something that is given to you but something you actively make yourself. Mrs. Islam echoes Woolf's conception of how self-confidence is made when she points out that the cage Nazneen finds herself in is not solely built by others: "If you think you are powerless, then you are" (Ali 65). Mrs. Islam suggests that there are ways for Nazneen to express herself, to claim her own identity, even within the strict confines of purdah. But, as previously pointed out: without self-confidence one is unlikely to identify, and even less likely to act according to, one's own needs and desires. Nazneen will not even admit to wanting a harder bed (Ali 44) and when she visits a doctor for a pregnancy check-up, she says nothing about having back pains knowing that he would not understand. In her mind she is not in the position of having things her way. She lives and breathes according to her husband's needs and desires. She even includes his wish for promotion in her prayers (Ali 42). Nazneen's way of obliterating herself brings to mind Woolf's thoughts on how one represses certain sides of oneself in order to be one thing only. Nazneen actively constructs her femininity by acting docile and submissive, by being neither seen nor heard.

The rationale for Nazneen denying herself any needs and desires is her lack of self-confidence, a feeling of inferiority that largely stems from her being a woman. From the first day of her life, she has been met with low expectations and assumed aspirations that, as previously pointed out by Woolf, keep her locked in as well as locked out. When her mother reveals the newborn Nazneen's sex to her father he is disappointed and woefully tells his wife: "Never mind" (Ali 16) and "What can you do?" (Ali 16). In London, Nazneen's feeling of inferiority is reproduced daily when Chanu systematically uses her to boost himself. He frequently opens conversations, or rather monologues, with "you see" (Ali 38) to mark how he is the educated one. When condescendingly addressing her, and consequently joining the long-lived tradition of men using women to feel good about themselves, Chanu is thus not primarily concerned with her inferiority but instead with his own superiority. If women were not constructed as inferior, "they would seize to enlarge" (Woolf 37).

Nazneen's best friend, Razia, is acutely aware of this patriarchal domination technique and tries to enlighten Nazneen: "Men like to be proven right. We have to go out of our way to show them how right they are" (Ali 70). Apart from feeling entitled to the interpretive prerogative of everyday situations, Nazneen's and Razia's husbands control all the money. Razia has to beg for money even to buy new toothbrushes for her children (Ali 96). Woolf highlights how financial independence is key for women to act on their own terms: "I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me" (Woolf 39). Women controlling their own money are thus not only provided with material possibilities but also relieved of bitterness and hatred toward men. Even though Razia is almost deaf to the slander of the Bangladeshi community and outspoken in conversations with Nazneen – she often scolds men for their shortcomings and recapitulates how she called her husband "a son-of-a-whore" (Ali 96) – an implicit threat of violence and her lack of money keep her in place. Razia is thereby locked in – generally acting in line with social convention – and locked out – she rarely ventures outside Tower Hamlets – for as long as her husband is alive.

The strategy toward realizing oneself by constructing other people as inferior is, however, not exclusively used by men on women in the course of the novel. It is ironic, as well as representative of the intersectional dimension of identity, that Chanu criticizes Dr. Azad – a respected member of the Bangladeshi community thanks to his title and wealth – for being a "finger blown up to a banana tree" (Ali 90). Chanu, in fact, employs the exact same strategy toward Nazneen when he for instance recites poetry to amplify his own importance. He is blind to the privilege that his gender and education buys him in interactions with her but can see clearly the class oppression to which he is subject – how Dr. Azad looks down on him

for his lack of title and success. There is yet another dimension to the complex relationship between Chanu and Dr. Azad. They are both only able to identify negatively – what you are not, I am – and thus use each other as figures of inferiority, in different social arenas, to construct their own identity. While Dr. Azad has the upper hand in terms of career and wealth, Chanu uses his seemingly happy family life as ammunition, sensing that Dr. Azad's marriage might not be as happy as he says it is. Instead of asking questions out of genuine interest in their conversations, they both aim to highlight each other's flaws and thereby construct their own identity. A strategy that brings Woolf's looking glass metaphor to mind.

Action & Reaction

The first signs of Nazneen trying to claim her space as someone separate from Chanu comes in the form of her traitorous exchange of looks with Dr. Azad over the dinner table (Ali 35). Nazneen, seemingly unconsciously, reveals her disloyalty to Chanu by looking at Dr. Azad in a way that tells him that she too sees through Chanu's bragging. Her covert acts of defiance are at first almost instinctual, like sudden outbursts of energy causing cracks in her veneer of docility and piety. Soon, however, she takes her mutiny to the next level:

Nazneen dropped the promotion from her prayers. The next day she chopped two fiery red chilies and placed them, like hand grenades, in Chanu's sandwich. Unwashed socks were paired and put back in his drawer. The razor slipped when she cut his corns. His files got mixed up when she tidied. All her chores, peasants in his princely kingdom, rebelled in turn. Small insurrections, designed to destroy the state from within (Ali 63).

Nazneen's silent rebellion against her husband serves two purposes: it is an attempt to make herself and her work visible as well as a way for her to distance herself from the identity of the graceful and loyal housewife imposed on her by Chanu and the world at large. These small insurrections can consequently be understood as a strategy toward making a room of her own.

When Chanu fails to see Nazneen's carelessness as rebellion, she tries even harder. During dinner, although she sits at the table with Chanu she never eats. It is her light version of a hunger strike, aimed at highlighting a more general self-denial that she is growing increasingly tired of (Ali 77). Instead of eating at regular hours, she gets up at night

and devours the now cold food straight out of plastic containers. The midnight meals become her refuge, her room of her own. In the dark, with no children to attend to and no food to prepare, she has access to the idleness that Woolf holds as central for the growth of the mind (39). Nazneen revisits her childhood, meditates on how she and Hasina – who eloped out of love and went against their father’s will – have ended up so far from each other even though they both started out in the same place. As soon as the sun goes up, however, Nazneen has to leave her own thoughts hanging in the air and instead listen to Chanu’s. To show her discontent and demonstrate her submission in an overly eager fashion, she starts answering, almost robotically, “if you say so, husband” (Ali 99) to most of Chanu’s opinions on bigger and lesser matters. This strategy, to ridicule Chanu’s omniscient ambitions, can be understood as sly civility. By caricaturizing Chanu, while still acting seemingly loyal to him, Nazneen can claim her own identity within a skewed power structure.

Nazneen goes from holding an air of graceful compliance to becoming more or less openly defiant and angry with Chanu and the world at large. Woolf argues that anger mixes with our emotions, poisons them in a way, and turns them into something slightly different (74). Nazneen’s subversive tricks only take her so far. She is only reacting. She never acts entirely on her own terms. When using sly civility to realize herself, she perpetuates the binary understanding of gender that keeps her in chains. She puts herself in a position where she is “uncritically taking over the very metaphysical categories set up by patriarchy in order to keep women in their places” (Moi 13).

Nazneen revises her hostile attitude toward Chanu as Raqib, their first-born son, falls ill with an unexplained high fever and is taken to the hospital. As Raqib is seemingly recovering – the illness later causes his tragic death – Nazneen starts to see Chanu in a new light. Instead of highlighting their differences to fan the flames of her anger, she attempts to make peace with him by acknowledging that Chanu too is looking for a place in the world:

He was looking for the same essential thing. But he thought he could grab it from outside and hold it against his chest like a shield. The degrees, the promotion, the Dhaka house, the library, the chair-restoring business, the import-export plans, the interminable reading. They were his self-fashioned tools. With them he tried to chisel out a special place, where he could have peace of mind (Ali 121).

Nazneen had turned into herself and tried to accept while Chanu had turned out and tried to struggle, but they were both looking for the same thing: an unimpeded mind. Bhabha argues that the dominating culture exerts an inescapable pressure that is unevenly applied depending on who you are (160). In the eye of the norm, just as in the eye of the storm, you will hardly know that it is blowing. But the farther away from the center you are, the more apparent the wind is and the more you have to compensate in order to stay on your feet. Nazneen and Chanu are both looking for shelter. Chanu tries to duck in the lee of his diplomas and high career aspirations while Nazneen tries to conceptualize the storm as God's exhalation. They are both products of hybridization but, and this is key to Bhabha's theory, since they are two different people they react to the pressure of the dominating culture differently. Chanu's high hopes – "I thought that there would be a red carpet rolled out for me" (Ali 34) – and subsequent feelings of failure stem from him being a man with a certificate from Dhaka University. He has both his gender and his education working for him when arriving in London. But when his dreams do not materialize the very same social factors leave him feeling aggrieved and indignant. Nazneen, on the other hand, has little counterweight to the dominant culture – she is a woman with no education, no money and no job – and consequently has little choice but to surrender to fate when she first arrives in London. Chanu and Nazneen's different responses to the pressure exerted by the dominating culture can consequently be explained by how other social factors, such as gender and education, intersect with ethnicity.

Regardless of their original attitude toward life in London, they both find themselves on the outside of Western society. Chanu wants to gain respectability and a sense of self through his deep knowledge of English literature – through rank and status – but cannot seem to get the promotion to which he feels entitled. He blames an alleged systemic racism: "To a white person we are all the same – dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan" (Ali 28). He aims to escape this imposed identity – to make a room of his own – by distancing himself from uneducated Bangladeshi immigrants and thereby engaging in what Bhabha calls mimicry. By calling his compatriots primitives, criticizing their illiteracy and lack of will to assimilate to British society – "they don't ever really leave home" (Ali 32) – Chanu tries to construct himself as "the prince among peasants" (Ali 27). He thus adopts Western values and sees himself and his compatriots through the eyes of the colonizer, the British people.

Razia, the most conspicuous example of mimicry, desperately tries to signal her 'Englishness' by wearing a sweatshirt with the Union Jack on it (Ali 229). She is a case in point for how mimicry produces a "reformed, recognizable Other that is almost the same, but

not quite” (Bhabha 122). Even though she mirrors the British in many respects they are still able to distinguish her as different in a crowd of people. Instead of being praised for her assimilation into British culture, she is spat on as a result of being recognized as a Muslim. She is almost the same but not quite and however hard she tries to blend in she can only ever be ‘anglicized’ but never be English.

Chanu’s attitude toward British cultural norms and values goes from trying to adopt and mimic them to identifying against them, wanting nothing more than to go back ‘home’ where he “knows what’s what” (Ali 464). During his first years of marriage, he considers himself ‘westernized’ and consequently does not outright forbid Nazneen from doing anything (Ali 45). He drinks alcohol because it is “ingrained in the fabric of London society” (Ali 110) and he refuses to haggle because he sees haggling as primitive behavior not suited for a cosmopolitan man like himself (Ali 91). But however hard he tries, Chanu too, is only ever to be almost the same, but not quite. He is defined by his ethnicity as soon as he sets foot outside of Tower Hamlets. When he steps on a bus the conductor asks: “Where are you from mate?” (Ali 291) as if he is talking to a tourist. For Chanu, this shift – from master of the household to “dirty little monkey” (Ali 28) – is hard to tackle. After their son Raqib tragically dies, Chanu has had enough and decides to resign from his job. Instead of striving to become a ‘respectable’ westerner he accentuates his roots and his religious beliefs. While denouncing Eurocentrism and raving about the Golden Age of Islam he picks his side: “It was us. The Muslims.” (Ali 215). He takes a job as a taxi driver and thereby complies with how he thinks the British see him, a decision that should not be understood as defeat but instead as an act of what Bhabha calls sly civility. Chanu plots to reverse the strategy of the English colonizers by taking their money and going back home: “Every rupee of profit made by an Englishman is lost forever to India. That’s how I am playing them at their own game now” (Ali 248). This sly civility is a way for Chanu to act on his own terms inside a skewed power structure. It is a way for him to reclaim his dignity and carve out a tiny room of his own.

Inside Tower Hamlets, Nazneen is defined by her gender. Purdah forbids her from going out alone and Chanu dictates their lifestyle. He refuses to let her learn the English language because he cannot see the point. When at the beginning of their marriage she asks him for permission to take college classes, Chanu uses the assumption that all women want to be mothers, and mothers only to silence her: “but you are going to be a mother (Ali 77)”. Nazneen is consequently, in Woolf’s terminology, locked in – assumed to hold motherhood as her prime goal in life – as well as locked out – denied education.

Outside of Tower Hamlets, however, Nazneen is just like Chanu defined by her ethnicity. White people objectify her, thinking they know exactly who she is without ever

having talked to her. She describes their eyes expressing “a blankness reserved for known quantities like a piece of furniture or brown women in saris who cooked rice and raised their children and obeyed their husbands” (Ali 391). As time goes by, however, she starts to discover aspects of the dominant British culture that she gravitates toward: the lack of gossiping, female independence, ice-skating and the idea of love as personal fulfillment. She tries on a pair of Chanu’s pants, as well as a handbag, to dream up her future look. The clothes and Western values and cultural norms are hers for the taking. They are tools she can use, and mediate through her own values, when exploring her own identity. As previously pointed out in the discussion of Bhabha’s postcolonial theory, the dominant culture does not only provide obstacles, but also opportunities, as Nazneen navigates toward a life on her own terms.

At first, she sees Karim as her ticket to a place in the world: “Most of all she thought of what he had that she and Hasina and Chanu sought but could not find. The thing that he had and inhabited so easily. A place in the world” (Ali 264). Karim is everything Chanu is not. He has a purpose – his Islamic activism – and is determined about what is right. He, seemingly, has the answer to the question that Nazneen, until now, had not had the courage to ask: What do I want? But Karim too puts her in a box. He is just a new middleman between her and the world and almost paraphrases Chanu’s description of her as “an unspoilt girl from the village” (Ali 22) when calling her “the real thing” (Ali 385). He too sees her as something pure and easily definable and as soon as they are done making love, they slide right into the same prescribed gender roles that characterize her marriage. Nazneen soon sees Karim for what he really is – a more nicely packaged Chanu – and ends their relationship by telling him how they “have made each other up” (Ali 382). She still does not know what she wants, but she knows what she does not want. She does not want to exist solely in relation to a man. She does not want to think about who she is but rather just be.

Losing Yourself To Find Yourself

The first glimpse of Nazneen ‘stepping out of herself’ is when she, almost instinctually, leaves the apartment on her own and heads toward Brick Lane as a reaction to one of her sister’s letters. In the letter, Hasina explains that she is going on her own to Dhaka to escape her abusive husband. Nazneen, taken by her sister’s predicament, wants to get lost to feel what she thinks Hasina must be feeling. She walks block after block and soaks up the atmosphere, the myriad of sensory impressions that life outside of Tower Hamlets has to

offer. She cannot decide if she is intrigued or scared by what she has set in motion when embarking into the unknown: “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” (Ali 56). Most of all, she is looking to disappear into thin air: “She turned down the first right, then went left. From there she took every second right and every second left until she realized she was leaving herself a trail. Then she turned off at random, began to run” (Ali 55). She is free and lets her mind wander. She observes, as a fly on the wall, the architecture, the people and the bustling life of her new home. But this oasis, this room of her own, is only there as long as she is anonymous. As long as she blends into her surroundings – as long as her presence is indifferent to the people around her – she can think and act freely. But as soon as she disrupts the flow of the city she is spotted and marked. Consequently, her mind alters its focus and “from being the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien” (Woolf 96). Every transgression of Western cultural norms will inexorably mark her as different. A blaring car horn signals that she is not where she should be (Ali 54) and a belittling smile from a white lady across the street tells her that she has no idea what she is witnessing (Ali 57). It is as if the white people in coats and suits and with a proper destination, only by looking at Nazneen, make her see herself through their eyes. This is a case in point of the double consciousness that Bhabha argues permeates the postcolonial situation. Her only way to escape the identity imposed on her by the people around her is to look inwards. “No longer invisible, Nazneen walked faster and looked only at what she had to see to walk without falling or colliding” (Ali 57).

Woolf argues that women need blinders when trying to write their own story – live life on their own terms (93). She elaborates on how women are constantly bombarded with advice from men who try to steer them onto the ‘right’ track. More specifically, she argues that women must not, and more importantly cannot, write their own story in reaction to men. The strategy for making a room of one’s own that Woolf suggests can, consequently, be described as a way of thinking about oneself that escapes the gender binary. The seemingly impossible task that Woolf lays before women is thus to not alter their values or actions “in deference to the opinion of others” (Woolf 75). When Nazneen’s heart is “ablaze, with mutiny” (Ali 63) and she starts to revolt against Chanu by everyday subversive tricks she becomes someone not entirely herself. Only in those rare instances when she neither succumbs to, nor revolts against, Chanu, her mother, or the world at large – when she loses herself in the moment and forgets her imposed place in the world – only then she is truly free. As she watches ice-skaters slide and swerve across the ice on her television she finds some peace of mind because she does something entirely on her own terms:

For a whole week it was on every afternoon while Nazneen sat cross-legged on the floor. While she sat, she was no longer a collection of the hopes, random thoughts, petty anxieties and selfish wants that made her, but was whole and pure. The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white, light glory. But when it ended and she switched off the television, the old Nazneen returned (Ali 41).

Nazneen actively seeks out moments in which to lose herself. First she watches ice-skating on television and later she becomes totally absorbed in perfecting every tiny detail when mending clothes. This quest to lose herself culminates when she gets romantically involved with Karim. In their sexual encounters, she gives in to lust and lets it take her wherever it wants to go: “If ever her life was out of her hands, it was now” (Ali 299). She is surprised by the powerful emotion and cannot connect it to herself. She has seen herself as weak but now she starts to realize that she has actively ‘thought’ herself weak. She realizes that she has repressed the active and powerful side of her that is uncovered when she gives in to lust. This epiphany changes everything: “She felt it now: there was nothing she would not do” (Ali 371).

She tries to free herself from her imposed identity – the adulterous Bangladeshi housewife – with all its attached shame and assumptions when she repeats: “You are nothing. You are nothing” (Ali 299). This mantra, first read as a reminder that in the grand scheme of things her adulterous affair with Karim is insignificant, can also be understood as her trying to break free from prescribed gender roles and assumptions closely linked to her ethnicity. One might interpret this strategy as escapism, just another method for taking herself out of the equation. However, I argue that Nazneen’s desire for being nothing should be understood as her desire to be able to become anything. She thereby echoes Woolf’s call for genderlessness. She wants to live life outside of the tiny frame that her gender and ethnicity make.

Ali uses images of uncertainty, of leaving things up in the air, throughout the novel. She seems to suggest that the predetermined life, the will of God and the prescribed gender roles which Nazneen was brought up to rely on, do not exist. Instead, Ali portrays life as inherently uncertain and suggests that the only way to deal with that is to grab it by the horns. In a conversation with Mrs. Islam, while sitting in the waiting room to see Dr. Azad, Nazneen reads a notice on the wall. She highlights the lack of divine guidance by commenting on how the signs “only tell you what not to do” (Ali 64). Since there is no

manual, living life on your own terms comes down to a series of trial-and-error where you learn by doing. Nazneen starts to face the fact that “there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women” (Woolf 112). However daunting this revelation may seem to Nazneen at first, it is at the same time a reminder of the agency she possesses.

The snow globes on Dr. Azad’s office desk – Nazneen thinks of them as ‘snowstorms’ – make for another vivid image of uncertainty. When Nazneen takes her daughter to see Dr. Azad he offers her to shake one as he writes out a prescription. He presents them with his interpretation of the world it possesses and how a snow globe is “just like life” (Ali 272). Instead of seeing a winter wonderland bursting with life, Dr. Azad sees chaos, a storm that has to be withstood. His way of dealing with this storm is to take shelter behind a ‘solid foundation’:

Dr. Azad picked up another snowstorm and shook it. If you are strong you withstand the storm. Can you see? The storm comes and everything is blurred. But all that is built on a solid foundation has only to stand fast and wait for the storm to pass (Ali 272).

Dr. Azad clings to an understanding of identity as fixed. Consequently, he advocates for standing fast and doing nothing while the storm blurs everything. If he allows himself to experience life to the fullest, this might spark new things in him that force him to redefine who he is. The tragic climax of Ali’s novel can thereby be traced to the moment when Dr. Azad admits to not knowing how to build a solid foundation (Ali 272). He is caught in a conception of identity that has rendered him a stranger in his own skin, afraid of living a full life because he fears finding out things about himself that does not match his gender, ethnicity and title and which thereby must be repressed.

In the closing scene of the novel, Nazneen is blindfolded and taken to an ice rink by her daughters and Razia: “To get on the ice physically – it hardly seemed to matter. In her mind she was already there” (Ali 492). She has ended the relationship with Karim and Chanu has left for Bangladesh. With no man in her life, she is without a middleman standing between her and the world. No one is holding her back and yet Nazneen hesitates for a moment and says: “But you can’t skate in a sari” (Ali 492). She still sees ice-skating as something that is beyond the realms of possibility for her. Either she is in a sari or she ice-skates. In this way she is still struggling to find her way out of the ‘binary cage’. The novel

ends with Razia giving her a little push: “This is England ... you can do whatever you like” (Ali 492).

Conclusion

In depicting the life of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman sent off to London at age eighteen to marry a man she has never seen, Monica Ali’s novel *Brick Lane* illustrates the double alienation that comes from being both a woman and an immigrant. As Nazneen ventures out of the cage and safe haven of fatalism she is subject to a binary understanding of gender that allows men to realize themselves by constructing women as inferior. Furthermore, the pressure exerted by the dominant Western culture causes her to see herself through the eyes of the British. Nazneen tries to revolt against her imposed identity as the loyal and docile Bangladeshi housewife by small insurrections aimed at claiming her own space inside a skewed power structure. However, her subversive tricks and sly civility are carried out inside a ‘binary cage’ in which she is only reacting. She never acts on her own terms. Only by losing herself in the moment – by giving in to lust, fully devoting herself to her work as a seamstress or watch ice-skating on television – is she able to transcend the otherwise impeding social structure. The novel ends at a crossroads as Nazneen is about to enter the ice. Without a middleman between her and the world, she is still struggling to realize herself outside the frame that her gender and ethnicity make.

Woolf points out how the history of women is missing. Generations of women have thereby been deprived of female role models to look up to. One can only hope that Nazneen gets on the ice. It is not too late to start a new tradition in which women can be women on their own terms. The ice is stable but slippery. It is the only solid ground one gets when making a room of one’s own. No god to trust or to blame. No prescribed gender rolls to fall into. No culture that is inherently yours. To be truly free is to actively struggle not to alter your values or actions in deference to others. To be truly free is to embrace being stuck in a no man’s land without opposing armies on each side. The quest is therefore not to find yourself but to keep yourself from thinking that you have. The ultimate goal is to stay open to the world. We are all in a perpetual state of flux and that is how it should be.

Works Cited

Primary sources

Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. Doubleday, 2003.

Secondary sources

Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. 1949. Vintage, 1997.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2004.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Feng, Pin-Chia. *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston: A Postmodern Reading*. P. Lang, 1999

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination*. 2nd ed., Yale University Press, 2000.

Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics*. Routledge, 2002.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. 1979. Penguin, 2003.

---. *The Edward Said Reader*. Edited by Bayoumi, Moustafa and Rubin, Andrew. Vintage Books, 2000

Sheik, Sheheryar B. "The Walls that Emancipate – Disambiguation of The 'Room' in *A Room of One's Own*". *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2018, pp. 19-31.

Showalter, Elaine *A Literature of Their Own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press, 1977.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 1929. Albatross Publishers, 2015.