

The Sensuality of Taste: Intercultural Dialogue and National Identity as Mediated by Food and Food Culture in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

Apart from being a compelling discourse on immigrants, cultural clashes, the East-West conflict, arranged marriages, extramarital affairs and general existential anxiety, Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* is also a fascinating excursion into the sensual and meandering world of food and its emotional and cultural implications. Trapped in an arranged marriage devoid of the passion her woman's heart had hoped for, the protagonist Nazneen seeks a substitute type of sensuality first in food, and subsequently in her son Raqib and her lover Karim, all part of an intricate and complex process of cultural self-discovery and self-definition. The present essay focuses on how food plays a central role in Nazneen's life as a young immigrant in London, being her only remaining connection to her homeland and to herself. While constantly telling her hungry heart "do not beat with fear, do not beat with desire" (27), Nazneen eats herself up searching for personal agency and fulfillment in a life which offers her neither. Food appears within this complex equation as a balancing element, a safety net, and an escape mechanism, which allows the protagonist to sustain not only her physical body, but also her famished soul, and to (re)establish her thwarted connection to her national and cultural identity.

Keywords: Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, national identity, food culture, intercultural dialogue

“Food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, craving and identity.”
(Foer)

In her article entitled “Food: Identity, Culture and Religion,” Vatika Sibal argues that “food is often used as a means of retaining (...) cultural identity” and that “what we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it, who’s at the table, and who eats first is a form of communication that is, it has a rich cultural base.” Going one step further and focusing on food culture within immigrant communities, Geetha Reddy and Rob van Dam state that “The choice of food practices can be influenced by one’s identity in many societies, but has mostly been evaluated in light of the maintenance of cultural identity in migrant populations.” And a 2017 *Post Pravda* article entitled “You Are what You Eat: Food Is Nationalism in the Caucasus” aptly notes that “In cases of contested national identities and disputed borders, seemingly innocent food choices become a channel for the assertion of national identity and the preservation of cultural heritage and territorial integrity. Hence, when food is identity struggle, what you eat becomes crucial to who you are” (*Post Pravda*). Finally, Kathleen Riley, a longtime researcher of the Marquesas culture in French Polynesia, notes that “when people of a certain socioeconomic class are told their food is ‘bad’, the message is that they’re bad people with bad values” (qtd. in Brown).

Hardly anyone has put it in a more eloquent manner than Carole Counihan, in her seminal work *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power*, in the opening section of which she argues that:

Food is a many-splendored thing, central to biological and social life. We ingest food over and over again across days, seasons, and years to fill our bellies and satisfy emotional as well as physical hungers. Eating together lies at the heart of social

relations; at meals we create family and friendships by sharing food, tastes, values, and ourselves. Festive meals celebrate festive occasions and enlarge the social group at office picnics, church suppers, barbecues, and potluck dinners. Because eating good food when hungry causes a euphoric feeling, feasts and meals are a wonderful way to create positive social relations. Similarly, when social relations are bad, eating can be painful and unpleasant. Food is a primary focus of much economic activity (though less in industrial societies and wealthy classes than in preindustrial societies and poorer classes). Food is a product and mirror of the organization of society on both the broadest and most intimate levels. It is connected to many kinds of behavior and is endlessly meaningful. Food is a prism that absorbs and reflects a host of cultural phenomena. An examination of foodways – behaviors and beliefs surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food – reveals much about power relations and conceptions of sex and gender, for every coherent social group has its own unique foodways. (6)

All of the aforementioned vantage points prove that food is never to be taken only at surface level – its cultural, emotional, and psychological implications running significantly deeper than that. Food is profoundly connected to both the individual and the society he/she belongs to, it is a cultural, spiritual and human marker, and it is rooted in both our conscious and unconscious minds. Food and an individual's relationship to it can offer important clues as to how that individual or the culture he/she belongs to views sensual pleasure, sexuality, power, social relations and even life itself.

A literary proof in this respect is also Monica Ali's 2003 novel *Brick Lane*, a story of immigration, cultural clashes, globalization, post-colonial realities, women's struggles – and, of course, food culture and the way it shapes and maintains identities. Framed by the story of a young Bangladeshi girl trapped in an arranged marriage with a much older man from London's East End, *Brick Lane* thematizes universal, as well as typical contemporary concerns, ranging from the dislocation and consequent loss of identity of immigrants, to the clash between Western secularism and Eastern religiousness, or the ever-present danger of Islamic

radicalization in Western societies among young, economically impaired Muslims. In Sylvia Brownrigg's opinion, the backbone of the entire novel, the force holding the various narrative threads together, is the protagonist Nazneen, "whose sensibility" (and, we would also say, sensitivity and sensuality), "shapes the novel." Nazneen's figure stands for both individuality and community, embodying the essential polarization between the national and the global, the local and the universal. Her quest for self-determination is masterfully depicted throughout the novel, not only through her tumultuous relationships with the men who cross her path, but also through her culinary journey. Food is, apart from sexuality, the main pillar of sensuality which sustains Nazneen's womanhood, as well as her connection to her ethnic and cultural origins. Food is both a means of escape from, and a connection to Nazneen's country of origin, her troubled family background, her marriage and her own self. While aspects of cultural identity, the status of the immigrant, or postcolonial interpretations, have been amply discussed in connection to the novel, little to no attention has been granted to the crucial importance of food and food culture in establishing a coherent sense of the cultural self in the novel. In what follows, we will attempt to prove that food not only plays an important role in the creation of sensuality in *Brick Lane*, but that it also significantly aids the construction of cultural, global, and national discourse in the text.

In a 2019 interview with *First Post* magazine, talking about authenticity and ethnic labels in her writing, Ali stated: "White men go anywhere and everywhere in their imagination. But somehow there's a notion, slight unsaid, under the radar, that as a minority, as a brown woman, really all I'm doing is voicing my authenticity. I mean, there's no hard work, talent, imagination, determination" (qtd. in Agrawal). Drawing on her remark, Aarushi Agrawal argues that "it seems Ali, as a BAME writer, can only have authenticity as a brown woman, not as a person." What is being debated here is to what extent a brown woman writer like Ali is expected by her readers to write (convincingly) about anything else except other brown women like herself. The creative cage Ali thus found herself

in is no different than the cultural cage her protagonist, Nazneen, finds herself in once having reached London and her husband's apartment in one of the many towers inhabited by immigrants in London's East End. Space in the novel shifts permanently between openness and reclusiveness, with both London and Bangladesh falling into each of the two categories.

Food takes up a central place in *Brick Lane*, even if this might not be obvious at first glance. The first thing that reconnects Nazneen to her homeland after her move to London is food. As she cannot speak any English apart from "Please" and "Excuse me," and her husband is out of the house most of the day, Nazneen feels lost, rootless, abandoned, and displaced. Her solitude risks taking its toll on her mental health, so she turns to the one and only element of stability in the midst of the cultural chaos that engulfs her: traditional Bangladeshi food. Her husband Chanu also eats only Bangladeshi dishes and expects his wife to dutifully cook them for him. The fact that Chanu refuses any types of English dishes is in perfect alignment with his general mistrust and rejection of almost anything Western. For him, eating Bangladeshi dishes exclusively is an almost political statement of cutting himself off from the English culture which has profoundly disappointed him. The idea implied here is that food can contribute to clashes between cultures and can bring about problems between individuals. At times, food stigmatizes ethnic groups and can even lead to social exclusion when immigrants try to stick to their own eating habits and traditional cuisine that have shaped them instead of accepting the food habits and culinary preferences of the majority (Rygiel 119). Chanu willingly and consciously isolates himself (and his young wife, and later his daughters) from what he perceives to be the profoundly rotten character of Western culture. He seems to harbor similar feelings also towards Western cuisine, which he obstinately and passionately rejects, along with everything else that is English. Having been denied the recognition he sought when he first came to the UK, Chanu now in his turn rejects English culture. In the end of the novel, he will return to Bangladesh, an economically and spiritually defeated man, without

his wife and daughters, who have embraced the English culture and way of life.

For Nazneen, food is not political, but emotional, it is her only tie to her home country, to the family and life she left behind. It is an affirmation of her identity during a time when she feels most identity-less. London and especially the neighborhood she lives in make Nazneen feel spiritually and physically displaced. Additionally, Tower Hamlets is associated with unpleasant sensations and odors which are in stark contrast to the comforting traditional dishes Nazneen prepares at home: “[A place] thick with the smell from the overflowing communal bins, where (...) the streets were stacked with rubbish, entire kingdoms of rubbish piled high as fortresses with only the border skirmishes of plastic bottles and grease-stained cardboard to separate them” (13, 43). Contrasting with this desolating image is the abundance of delicious dishes Nazneen makes for the first guest who visits hers and Chanu’s home, Dr. Azad. Nazneen knows the important role of food in maintaining social relationships and strengthening community bonds. Therefore, she allots much care to the preparation of the dinner: she had prepared most of the dishes but still “there was the dal to make, and the vegetable dishes, the spices to grind, the rice to wash, and the sauce to prepare for the fish that Chanu would bring this evening” (8). Even if there will be only one guest, Nazneen is meticulously careful about the dinner preparation and the variety of dishes served. Fabio Parasecoli opines that celebratory meals “strengthen a sense of belonging through specific ingredients, dishes, and practices from the migrants’ place of origin” (420). The choice of dishes Nazneen makes reflects her culture as well as her belonging to the diaspora that her guest is also a part of. In the beginning of the novel, Nazneen copies Chanu’s behavior and is averse to any English culinary or cultural influence, sticking rigidly to the Bengali dishes she knows and cherishes. Not only does Nazneen care about the dishes that will be served, but she is also very particular about aesthetic details, such as the table cloth or the glasses, which have to be shiny and spotless. She usually does not care that much about such aspects when it is only her and

Chanu eating – but Dr. Azad’s visit is a social event, which highlights the importance of food in Bengali culture beyond its obvious role of nutrition. Food is an excuse to get together, to express one’s culture, respect towards others, and to strengthen existing social and friendship ties. For the three, the get-together is more than just an occasion to consume traditional food: it is a means of affirming their shared culture, of experiencing cultural togetherness in a foreign country where none of them feels truly welcome. Later on in the novel, we will find out that Dr. Azad, who is defending traditional Muslim values in his conversations with Chanu, is actually married to a libertine, Westernized woman, and disrespected by his own daughter. In the end, the only real ties that the two men have to their homelands are the ones offered by food and food culture.

Another important aspect is that Nazneen only shops in corner shops which offer traditional Bangladeshi ingredients: “stacked with kebabs, tandoori chicken, bhajis, puris, trays of rice and vegetables, milky sweets, sugar-shined ladoos, the faintly sparkling jelabees” (400). Other members of the diaspora also shop there, thereby reaffirming their ties to the cultural and ethnic community they belong to. *Brick Lane* also features a multitude of traditional Bengali restaurants, visited not only by the immigrant locals, but also by white Westerners. They are a cultural meeting point, a crossroads evocative of London’s multicultural and multiethnic character. An interesting fact is also that these restaurants, from the simplest to the most high-end ones, display Hindu statuettes in their windows, even though Bangladesh is a majority Muslim country. This is done in order to attract and appease white customers, for whom these subtle differences are rather blurred and unimportant. It is yet another example of covert racism, which denies Bangladeshi people their own distinct identity, cramming them together with Indians as a big, indistinct whole. The statuettes are a symbol of the immigrant’s being denied his identity. He has to be what the white locals want him to be, and not what he truly is.

Nazneen feels close to the members of the diaspora in Tower Hamlets also by means of food and cooking rituals. When she opens the window of her crammed flat, she can sense the smell of curry being cooked, and is instantly transported to her home in Bangladesh and her family's cooking. The neighborhood rituals, such as unexpectedly popping in to borrow various cooking ingredients for traditional dishes, also show the tightly knit community ties between the Bangladeshi immigrants.

On a personal level, food plays a very important role in Nazneen and Chanu's marriage the moment their son is sick and has to be hospitalized. While Nazneen is in hospital, Chanu cooks a traditional meal and brings it to her, which can be interpreted as the symbolic role food plays as a marker of love, affection, devotion and care. The dish Chanu brings to the hospital has a positive effect on all those gathered there, mostly relatives caring for their sick family members: "The warm, heady smell of spices blanketed the air, twitched noses and lifted heads" (96). The sensual pleasure Nazneen experiences while eating in the hospital is of an almost erotic nature: "The rice was superb (...) fresh coriander made her swoon for the chicken. The deeply oily aubergine beckoned lasciviously. She wanted to stick her tongue in the velvety dal" (104). The rice carries profoundly erotic connotations for Nazneen, it makes the eater "lie down and groan with satisfaction" (104). The connection between food and sensual erotic pleasure is also discussed by Counihan, who argues that

In many cultures there are associations between eating, intercourse, and reproduction [...]. Eating and intercourse both involve passage across body boundaries of external substances that are then incorporated into the body. Both are essential to life and growth. The instinctive drives for food and sex are similar, and they often take on overlapping symbolic associations. There is a life-long connection between oral and sexual gratification (Freud 1962). Eating together implies intimacy, both sexual intimacy and kinship (Freud 1918, 175; Siskind 1973, 9). Both eating and copulation cause and symbolize social connection. (9)

Bereft of true erotic experiences in her marriage to a much older man, the protagonist resorts to food in order to satisfy her sensual needs. Food offers her the physical and emotional satisfaction she needs in order to cope with her life in London.

Food becomes, later on, an act of self-assertion in the novel, once Nazneen starts discovering and creating her own identity. During her pregnancy, she avoids common meals with her husband and prefers eating alone at midnight. This is an act of rebellion towards both Chanu and the blind submission to fate her mother had educated her in. The symbolic significance of eating together with someone, or refusing to do so, is also noted by Counihan, who notes that “Precisely because eating and intercourse involve intimacy they can be dangerous or threatening when carried out under adverse conditions or with untrustworthy people. Hence all cultures have rules and taboos to regulate food and sex and to define appropriate bed and table mates. In many cultures people with whom one can eat are those with whom one can have sex and vice versa” (10).

To conclude, we might state that food plays a crucial role in *Brick Lane* and is an aspect that has often been overlooked by the novel’s commentators. It is a source of cultural and ethnic identity, physical and spiritual comfort, a means of establishing and nurturing social ties and communion, and a means of asserting one’s individuality.

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