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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **From the Oppression of Patriarchy and Inferiority to Freedom: The Reconstruction of Muslim Women's Selfhood in *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study aims to explore patriarchy and inferiority as social oppression experienced by Muslim women, as well as the reconstruction of selfhood that Muslim women achieved despite the oppression inflicted upon them by patriarchy and inferiority. To achieve this aim, the novel *Brick Lane* (2003) by the contemporary Bangladeshi-British author Ali will be analysed, with a focus on the social dilemmas faced by the Muslim female character, Nazneen. Through the analysis of the selected novel, this study will underscore the powerful role of inferiority and patriarchy in unjustly oppressing Muslim women, while also highlighting the reconstruction of selfhood as a crucial pathway to their liberation.

**KEYWORDS**

*Brick Lane*, Inferiority, Monica Ali, Oppression, Patriarchy, Reconstruction of Selfhood.

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### **1. Introduction**

Most feminist scholars argue that women's issues have long been obscured by a pervasive falsehood that portrays them as inherently inferior. Anna Snaith (2000), for instance, suggests that this misconception stems from imperialist ideologies: "the manufacturing of the private sphere as a haven, then, depends on nineteenth-century discourses of female sexuality: the woman's body stands metonymically for the home, and indeed the private sphere itself, as it does in discourses of imperialism" (p. 18). Critically, defending women's rights is a false campaign about women without allowing them to recognise their rights (Berkovitch, p. 11). There have, of course, been many cases in which both men and women have faced mistreatment and oppression. In all cases, mistreatment and oppression create harsh conditions, as people are exploited for certain agendas and treated as inferiors (Fakhruddin & Bahar, 2022; Fakhruddin et al., 2023). Yet, women have encountered significant hardships to claim their rights and overcome mistreatment and oppression, which should be viewed with dignity. One of the essential issues is that women still do not experience the same job atmosphere and equitable treatment as men. In this regard, the sociologists Irene Padavic and Barbara Reskin (1994) state:

Sex inequality in the workplace is manifested in several ways: The sexes are concentrated in different occupations; women are often confined to lower-ranking positions than men and are less likely than men to exercise authority; women earn less than men. Social scientists have advanced several explanations for these disparities: cultural factors, sex stereotypes, the preservation of male advantage, and discrimination by employers. (p. 24)

The philosopher Simone de Beauvoir admits that women's emancipation has achieved some harm; yet, women could not completely deny becoming members of the world of man, whether through corporate force or in their artistic work (Sartre, 1956, p. 32). However, as Muslims, we must recognise that women are often preserved as prisoners of men, particularly in rural areas.

Numerous real-life narratives reflect this perspective. Across much of Asia and the Arabian Gulf, Muslim women live in a patriarchal culture in which even breathing peacefully is complicated: "over the past fourteen centuries, Muslim women have been subjected to spatial limitation and, in some instances, complete segregation. Their mobility and participation in the wider world have been monitored relentlessly by the patriarchal establishment" (Shirazi, 2009, p. 25).

Numerous feminist authors have used their literary works to champion women's freedoms and advocate for equality. One such powerful example is the novel *Brick Lane* (2003) by the contemporary Bangladeshi-British author Ali (b. 1967), which offers a multifaceted perspective on these issues. The narrative follows Nazneen, a young Muslim girl from Bangladesh, who enters into an early arranged marriage to a middle-aged man, named Chanu. Upon relocating to London, Nazneen faces numerous challenges on her journey towards liberation, especially from her domineering husband. The novel poignantly portrays the experience of a young Muslim girl from the third world, who lives in a Western society and still grapples with the constraints of Bangladesh's culture imposed upon her by her husband.

The novel has attracted the attention of numerous scholars who have explored various issues within the text, such as the representation of the Orient (Noufal, 2014), identity crisis (Abu-Samra, 2016), Islamophobia (Aziz, 2019), trauma, survival and resistance (Baysal, 2020), domestic food spaces (Baučeková, 2021), Other (Kotwal, 2022), mimicry, hybridity, third space and ambivalence (Ali, 2023). However, I argue that the issues of patriarchy, inferiority and reconstruction of selfhood related to Muslim women are important issues that have been dismissed in previous studies on this novel and need to be a research focus. The goal of this study, therefore, is to investigate these debatable issues by analysing the selected novel.

## **2. Methodology**

This study applies a textual analysis methodology to analyse the image of the Muslim female character in *Brick Lane* by Ali. It also applies the concepts of patriarchy, inferiority and reconstruction of selfhood from a social perspective. Through applying these concepts, the study explores how Muslim women face the social oppression of patriarchy and inferiority, and how they reconstruct themselves despite the heavy oppression of such patriarchy and inferiority that significantly impact their lives, as depicted in the novel. These issues hold considerable significance in literature, making their exploration a valuable addition to literary research.

## **3. Study Question**

This study tries to answer the following question:

- How does the Muslim female character Nazneen face the oppression of patriarchy and inferiority, and how does she reconstruct her selfhood despite such oppression?

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### ***4.1. From the Oppression of Patriarchy and Inferiority to Freedom: The Reconstruction of Muslim Women's Selfhood***

In *Theorising Patriarchy* (1990), the sociologist Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (p. 20). In this sense, patriarchy refers to a social composition where men possess sovereignty and dominance over women. Therefore, the idea of this concept is employed against women so that they constrain themselves and destroy their social lives. Similarly, in the novel, although Nazneen lives in an urban society in London, she is exposed to the fate dictated by her husband, Chanu, due to her early arranged marriage to him without any love or attachment. In the following textual evidence from the novel,

Chanu had not beaten her yet. He showed no signs of wanting to beat her. In fact, he was kind and gentle. Even so, it was foolish to assume he would never beat her. He thought she was a "good worker" (she had overheard him on the telephone). He would be shocked if she lapsed. (Ali, 2008, p. 10)

In the textual evidence above, we can clearly see how Nazneen bears the mistreatment of her husband, who has thoughts of beating her if she lapses, as he considers her a maid. Chanu, here, exemplified such an idea of patriarchy by dominating, oppressing and exploiting Nazneen. As Walby asserted, this situation incarnates a form of patriarchal oppression.

Besides the notion of patriarchy, we can clearly see the agenda of inferiority in the novel. The agenda of inferiority is constructed independently upon certain people, which the oppressors use to designate the oppressed people as inferior (Sibanda, 2021, p. 148). According to critic Bram Dijkstra (1986), when it comes to men-female relationships, this idea helps to create and reproduce the image of feminine inferiority that men require and cultivate to idealise masculine dominance (p. 28). As such, inferiority may manifest as both internalised and externalised. In the novel, despite the diaspora culture in which Nazneen lives in London, which

is deemed less significant compared to the dominant British culture, she suffers from the oppression of her husband, Chanu. She is also compelled to obey his commands, as she lacks the freedom to express her own opinions. These ideas are clearly stated in the following textual evidence:

Nazneen kept quiet. Her guts prickled. Her forehead tightened. All he [Chanu] could do was talk. The baby was just another thing to talk about. For Nazneen, the baby's life was more real to her than her own. His life was full of needs: actual and urgent needs, which she could supply. What was her own life, by contrast, but a series of gnawings, ill-defined and impossible to satisfy? (Ali, 2008, p. 62)

It is clear from the textual evidence above that Nazneen suffers from the injustice of Chanu, as he does not care about her and their child. It is also clear that Nazneen is obliged to obey Chanu's dominance and say nothing in his presence. Nazneen, in this context, is oppressed and suffers from inferiority as a result of her husband's dominance. Inferiority, as discussed earlier by Dijkstra, stems from being retained under 'masculine dominance'. As such, this masculine dominance is an obvious representation of patriarchal social forces that produce such inferiority upon women.

In *The Other Self: Selfhood and Society in Modern Greek Fiction* (2003), professor Dimitris Tziouvas argues that, in some societies, "identity or selfhood is constructed in relation to the patriarchal Symbolic Order" (p. 138). In the novel, Nazneen endured significant tribulations from her oppressive husband, who finally decided to leave her alone with her children and go back to Bangladesh. All of these adverse circumstances affected her life. Therefore, her thoughts about the consequences of her experiences and her urge to raise her children in an egalitarian society became a force of transformation. Her reflections focused on self-reforming, resisting oppression, and restoring self-interest. In this regard, the philosopher Richard Wollheim (1984) states that "in reconstructing his [or her] development, a person reactivates it. In this way there is a tendency to move from self-interpretation to self-assessment, from self-assessment to self-criticism, from self-criticism to self-change" (p. 187). Similarly, Nazneen starts to sustain herself besides being willing to offer her thoughts; this allows her to conquer the barrier of uncertainty and anxiety in voicing herself. This shift can be seen in the following textual evidence:

She waved her arms, threw back her head and danced around the table. *Shout!* She sang along, filling her lungs from the bottom, letting it all go loose, feeling her hair shake out down her neck and around her shoulders, abandoning her feet to the rhythm, threading her hips through the air. She swooped down and tucked her sari up into the band of her underskirt. *Shout!* (Ali, 2008, p. 412)

In the textual evidence above, Nazneen starts thinking differently and decides to live her own life independently. In doing so, Nazneen overcomes the challenge of claiming her rights and abolishes the power of oppression from her life. She changed from being submissive to confident. This change is an obvious indication of the reconstruction of Nazneen's selfhood. Therefore, despite the oppression of patriarchy and inferiority that Nazneen tolerated from her husband, she has succeeded in reconstructing her selfhood and achieving her liberation from all of these social forces.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the textual analysis methodology that has been conducted by applying the selected conceptual framework of patriarchy, inferiority and reconstruction of selfhood to the textual evidence in the novel, this study has explored patriarchy and inferiority as social oppression inflicted upon Muslim women to restrict their social lives, as well as the reconstruction of selfhood that the Muslim women achieved notwithstanding the oppression of patriarchy and inferiority that they endured. This is attained through shedding light on the struggles of the Muslim heroine Nazneen with the social oppression of patriarchy and inferiority practised upon her by her husband, Chanu, and how she, despite such oppression that she suffered, has finally achieved her liberation by reconstructing her selfhood. In this way, the analysis has demonstrated reflections on the reconstruction of the selfhood of Muslim women under the social oppression represented by patriarchy and inferiority. This study is, of course, limited to the conceptual framework of patriarchy, inferiority and reconstruction of selfhood, and to Ali's depictions of social oppression of patriarchy and inferiority as well as the reconstruction of selfhood of Muslim female characters in *Brick Lane*. To conclude, future research can be done by applying Bell Hooks's concepts of power and dominance to explore the psychological effects of oppression experienced by Muslim female characters in the novel. Future research can also be done by applying Iris Marion Young's concept of cultural imperialism to explore the social oppression of Muslim characters under British imperialism.

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