

## Debunking the Progressive Men in Monica Ali's Brick Lane

**Latha. S**

Associate Professor, Indian Academy Degree College- Autonomous, Bangalore, India

### Abstract

“There was really nothing. It was very strange. May be it was there waiting inside and suddenly at one moment, it came out ... I could feel something building up in me and that caused the outburst.” (“Denying the otherness” II) The statement was made by Shashi Deshpande on her becoming a writer. On the basis of this remark by Shashi Deshpande, the paper explores the protagonist Nasneen of Brick Lane. Nasneen is an ordinary woman with no expectation as a girl. After her marriage to Chanu- a progressive and ideal husband material, with no expectations lead a normal life of bearing children, taking care of husband. Only when trouble shoots up at the financial front, she naturally adopts by sewing cloths that Chanu brings home. At this summit in her life she meets Karim- another man and falls in love. The paper attempts to recognize the two men and try to explain the limitations or the stereotypical behavior which obstruct their growth. Further observes that exposure to education and employment play a major role in women lives – they become aware of themselves, get empowered and create a platform for independent/ individual thought.

**KEYWORDS:** progressive gender, ideal man, limitations, failure.

“There was really nothing. It was very strange. May be it was there waiting inside and suddenly at one moment, it came out ... I could feel something building up in me and that caused the outburst.” (“Denying the otherness”II) The statement was made by Shashi Deshpande (20 November, 1994) on her becoming a writer. On the basis of this remark by Shashi Deshpande, the paper explores the protagonist Nasneen of Brick Lane. Nasneen is an ordinary woman with no expectation as a girl. After her marriage to Chanu- a progressive and ideal husband material, with no expectations lead a normal life of bearing children, taking care of husband. Only when trouble shoots up at the financial front, she naturally adopts by sewing cloths that Chanu brings home. At this summit in her life she meets Karim- another man and falls in love. The paper attempts to recognize the two men and try to explain the limitations or the stereotypical behavior which obstruct their growth. Further observes that exposure to education and employment play a major role in women's life – they become aware of themselves, get empowered and create a platform for independent/ individual thought.

### Debunking the progressive men in Monica Ali's Brick Lane

In the Stone Age man lived in caves and forests. He hunted wild animals with rough weapons and ate raw meat as they were not aware of the use of fire. Gradually men in the new Stone Age became civilized. They used sharp tools, began to grow crops, tend cattle, spin thread and weave cloth. They learnt to use fire and cooked their food. History speaks about the Dravidians, the early inhabitants of South India, who were highly civilized; they chose to live in the regions with natural advantages. Next, enter the Aryans, another

highly civilized people who occupied central Asia. They were worshipers of nature, it is believed they progressed in all fields and made the world a better place to live in.

The evolution of man speaks about the development of man. As man progressed, they realized the importance and complications of child bearing. Women were destined to take care of the children and family, while the real world was left in the trust of men to deal with. Women were always marginalized and acted as a supporting component or treated as manufactures of the human race. Other reason for this position to women was that man was always at war among other tribes, man power was important for survival of the tribal communities. Women saw their men facing varied challenges, wanting to support him abided by the rules and regulations of the society to act as the subordinate. Hence lost the larger world to man.

When man became greedy and his obsession for power destroyed peace and harmony, new religions/ thoughts were created to curb injustice and dominance of the existing religion, only to be polluted by selfish men. Kings maintained a huge army consisting of footsoldiers, horsemen, charioteers and elephants. During these struggling period saving the king, fort and livelihood was important, though some women came front to give their opinion, they would be quickly erased for two reasons one to safeguard her from the enemy another is that she lived in the man's world, they thought they were doing better. At many instances history was manipulated to show women in a bad light, causing trouble to the family and society. Example from Ramayan state's that -Rama's step mother Kaikeyi had helped her husband to win a war, for which Dasharatha promised three boons, which she could use any time. The epic shows how she misuses the boon to put her son Bharata to throne, exterminating Rama to the forest, causing pain to all and to herself. Another example from the same epic, when Sita was kidnapped by Ravan, Ram kills Ravan and brings her back. People question her chastity and the king immediately exterminates her from the kingdom. Though the epic justifies these actions as karma/ responsibilities of man to fulfill his destined life, but it also showcases the way of life, path to follow, which is very difficult to erase from history.

Later the Mughals, the French and the English invaded India. Many changes took place at the personal front and in the society. People learnt different techniques, skills at different fronts, women only continued to be part of men's life, helping him in his progress. During the freedom movement, women were part of the struggle with men; they were exposed to the problems faced by the country and contributed accordingly keeping family in mind, society/country in mind.

With modernization, numerous things altered in society, with lot of machines invented to do different jobs- new challenges were raised about the survival of man. Commercialization gave new lease with lot of job opportunities. Government brought in many regulations, schemes for women giving equal opportunities/ facilities like financing education, providing jobs etc.

Today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Man lives in a completely different world. His journey has not been easy. How have the lives of man and woman changed in this changing world? The study of the novels of the South Asian Region have paved the way to

understand how man and woman cope with the changes and the way human relationships evolve and operate. How the idea of marriage and domesticity, the unattainable social constructions is affected and shaped by the larger factors that are tradition and culture assigned on women?

It is interesting to note that with the alteration in perceptions, today the role of women as mother, daughter, and wife-marriage has drastically changed. Women are seen to adopt themselves easily to any given situations keeping in mind the larger world. Ashis Nandy observes,

“...for more sensitive woman, the challenge is nothing less than redefinition of herself. The first task that faces her is to devise means of de-emphasizing some aspects of her role in her family and society and emphasizing others, so that she may widen her identity without breaking totally from its cultural definition or becoming disjunctive with its psychological distinctiveness.”(42)

Trusting this complex nature/ personality on women, the paper examines the protagonist Nasneen, other women and the male characters in Monica Ali's Brick Lane. Nasneen is an ordinary woman, with no expectation as a girl. After her marriage to Chanu- a progressive and ideal husband material, she is thankful to her father: “Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma” (16). So with no expectations she leads a normal life of bearing children, taking care of her husband and doing domestic chores. When they went out “Chanu would push the pram and she would walk a step behind ... At the shops, Chanu would buy vegetables.” (90) Chanu feels superior and expressed his care for his wife that Nasneen should be lucky to have married him- an educated man who did lot of things for her. “That was a stroke of luck.” (45) At times she would be disillusioned/ disappointment in the conjugal relationship, but thinking it her fate, she prayed and faced her problems saying: “What cannot be changed must be borne, and nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne.” (6) She was not allowed to speak to /know the outside world.

She did not often go out. “Why should you go out?” said Chanu. “If you go out, ten people will say, “I saw her walking on the street.” And I will look like a fool. Personally, I don't mind if you go out but these people are so ignorant. What can you do?” ... Besides, I get everything for you that you need from the shops. Anything you want you only have to ask...in Bangladesh you would not go out. Coming here you are not missing anything, only broadening your horizons (45).

Only when their son Raquib was seriously ill and admitted in the hospital that both husband and wife really understood their lives and personalities. Chanu realises the strength of his wife to endure him and continue to lead a peaceful life. On the other hand, Nasneen, the ideal mother and a wife, did not know till this day that Chanu was a good cook. He cooked food for Nasneen and son and carried to the hospital. Her doubt was if he had known cooking why had he not helped her in the kitchen, she realizes:

“in all those years before he married, he must have cooked. And since, he had only leaned on the cupboards and rested his belly on the kitchen surfaces while she chopped and fried and wiped around him. It did not irritate her that he had not helped. She felt, instead, a touch of guilt for finding him useless, for not crediting him with this surprising ability.”

Nasneen lost her mother in an accident. She was a traditional woman, silently bared the sufferings of the society and marriage. The two daughters Nasneen and Hasina were instructed by the mother to tolerate the problems of life because they were born women. In one of the letters, Hasina informs Nasneen the death of the mother that she committed suicide, she had witnessed it. After which Hasina, not wanting the same fate as her mother runs away from home, falling in love with a man. Hasina had new hopes of the outside world, wanting to modify her fate. She did not know the outside world was dreadful than the one she knew. When her marriage fails, she does not lose hope, an outcast, having no way out, she still goes in search of a better life for herself, survives several obstacles in the patriarchal society. The lines: “How much I have to praise for Him! How much He have given me! All times I making mistakes, all times I going off from straight Path” (233) shows her positivity. Her life seems a vicious circle, in her last letter to Nasneen, she mentions her love for a man.

The life of Hasina narrated through the letters to Nasneen, helps Nasneen realize the hostility of her home town and known people towards the anguish of women: “A woman on her own in the city, without a husband, without family, without friends, without protection” (58) leads a horrific life. Though Nasneen’s life was not exiting, excluding her right to her life, she is happy with her daughters’ progress. Chanu had always restricted Nasneen from exploring the new world and to learn the language English along with Razia. It was only because of her daughters, Shahana and Bibi, that Nasneen was able to pick some English.

Chanu, Nasneen’s husband is a graduate from Dhaka University, he had ample opportunities in Dhaka that would better his prospects but he wanted to root himself in Britain. He worked hard for his promotions, which never came by because of his origin. He entrusted all hopes of success on the unknown world, living in illusion. Chanu has high opinion about himself. He puts down others from his country coming to Britain as low and “Uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition” (20-21) people. Chanu conducts to the society as a broad minded person, but in actuality he is very conservative and biased. His description of Nasneen to one of his relative reveals his true self as a conformist: “...not so ugly ... hips are a bit narrow but wide enough ... to carry children ... a blind uncle is better than no uncle ... she is a good worker ... a girl from the village: totally unspoilt” (14-15).

He crafts his importance in Britain to his family, who has lot of expectations from him. He disappoints them when no help is provided back home. Nasneen sees his failure in his inability to express himself. With no hope in his present job, Chanu takes up odd jobs, he fails terribly as he is not able to blend himself to the place, financially and emotionally broke, he finally decides to move to Bangladesh with his family. He asserts his difference by claiming:

“I am forty years old’ . . . I had ambitions. Big dreams . . . And then I found things were a bit different. These people here didn’t know the difference between me, who stepped off an aeroplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only the lice on their heads” (34).

Chanu’s stiffness is exposed, when he witnesses his wife and two daughters settling comfortably in Britain, he has no answers for their questions. He feels an outsider in his home and the place. On the other hand Nasneen adapts to the financial problems naturally by sewing cloths that Chanu brings home. At this summit in her life she meets Karim- another man and falls in love:

“She always felt an equal with Karim. Karim was her window to the outside world of Tower Hamlets: “His knowledge shamed her. She learned about her Muslim brothers and sisters. She learned how many they were, how scared and tortured. She discovered Bosnia ... He shamed her and excited her” (198).

Monica Ali brings in the crash of the two world trade centre in London. This helps the readers to identify the multiple identities of many immigrants (Muslims) and the struggle they undergo because of this multiple identity. Karim struggles with his multiple identity. He was the second generation Bangladeshi. Karim becomes an outlet to Nasneen, who was suffering from socio-economic and psychological conditions. He supplies cloth to Nasneen when Chanu is busy. Meeting Karim and participating in the meetings organized for the welfare of the people of the community, Nasneen understands the outside world, the struggles of young people with multiple identity -facts of being a second generation, also of language, religious issues, sex and the free society. Karim is made the President of the group.

Karim’s falls in love with Nazneen because: “She was his real thing. A Bengali wife. Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her” (382). Nasneen was the “real thing” ideal woman for marriage. Karim understanding of other women is that:

“Well, basically you’ve got two types. Make your choice. There’s your Westernized girl, wears what she likes, all the makeup going on, short skirts and that soon as she’s out of her father’s sight. She’s into going out, getting good jobs, having a laugh. Then there’s your religious girl, wears the scarf or even the burkha. You’d think, right, they’d be good wife material. But they ain’t. Because all they want to do is argue. And they always think they know best because they’ve been off to all these summer camps for Muslim sisters” (321).

Karim had lost his mother, seeing Nazneen was a feeling of being in his lost home with his mother. It was difficult for both of them to not meet each other. Nasneen and

Karim had their own reasons to be together. Though both of them knew that, their meeting was a crime. Soon guilt ridden- Nazneen shudders thinking of the punishment they would be given for the crime they were doing: “the sentence was death” (247). Karim grows beard and takes religious instructions from the imam, showing signs of guilt in his heart. Nazneen is worried for Karim. She tried to look for options/ opportunities, with no assurance- she decides to end the relation.

Nazneen always felt she was a weak woman, but now making this decision, she felt she possessed a power and this “power was inside her, that she was its creator.” She was surprised “How could a weak woman unleash a force so strong?” (247) She tried to convince herself that it was the work of fate and left it at that. Her relationship with Karim proved beneficial, fruitful to Nazneen. It helped her to assess life in a better way, to detach herself from her past and understand the present circumstances- look at opportunities, which provided a great relief. On the other hand, reading Hasina’s letters of back home weaned Nazneen of her connection back home. Nazneen silently internalizes the two worlds – her present world Britain and her home town through Hasina’s letters. She alters her feeling to understand her relation to her motherland, her dependence to her husband and her lover Karim all in a new manner. Nazneen’s calm posture, her contentedness towards life and exposure to different situations empower her.

The place London away from home also makes life easier not only for Nazneen, but to many women Razia, Mrs. Azad and their children etc shedding their inhibitions and restrictions. Nazneen decides to stay back in London with her daughters. She is also able to break her connections with Karim, who has no identity of his own. Critic John Marx observes that, “Nazneen is a character who recognizes that the act of making a choice is significant. The narrative presents her as a figure aware that even small choices can have substantial ramifications” (19).

Razia struggles to bring up her children with little support from her husband. Razia’s husband sends back home, all the money he earns, Razia is left with barely anything to feed her children. She takes up courses in English to equip herself with skills needed to get a job. She is an inspiration to Nazneen, the way she adapts to the place and continues to support her family in the new country. Another lady is Mrs. Azad, doctor’s wife. Mr. Azad wanted to go back to Bangladesh, but his wife and children had infected so much to London lifestyle that it made difficult for Mr. Azad to take them back home. Mrs. Azad believes that once you chose to live in London, people should adapt to the place. She feels annoyed when the Bangladeshi immigrants refuse to adapt to the Western life, further blame the English society for its influence on their children.

Nazneen, Razia and Mrs. Azad in Britain are liberated and enjoy freedom with their children as they were able to assimilate to the new place breaking free of the constriction of the community. They materialize as self-determining individuals. In contrast, the men Chanu and Karim who project themselves as progressive, restrict themselves in the name of culture and tradition, obstructs their growth and for others. Finally, Chanu feeling isolated leaves Britain to settle in Bangladesh forever. Karim becomes religious person.

The paper presents that men seem to restrict the given opportunities, create complexity affecting life for themselves and others. Women amend/ modify their lives, when provided better opportunities. Nabaneeta Dev Sen(2007) (a writer)remarks, “It’s one thing to be gender-conscious, another to be gender-bound. Being gender-bound by choice is a self-defeating act today... In the practice of literature, we need not be imprisoned by our gender.” (18)One needs to be conscious of one’s gender and spirited to survive with their growing self-awareness and be prepared to re-assess their roles and options to create a better world to live for all.

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