

Cultural Crises of the Immigrants : A Comparative Study of Monica Ali and Uma Parameswaran

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cultural Identity is the major problem that rules the world at present, as immigration has increased to a large extent. Hence, quest for identity and longing for past as come into routine life. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Uma Parameswaran's *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard Trees* focus on Alienation, Nostalgia, Racism and other Psychological aspects faced by the migrants. Though both hail from different countries and live in different atmosphere, both the writers have undergone cultural crises and the outcome of it are their works. This paper comparatively analyses the roots and the crises of the immigrants.

Key Words : alienation, nostalgia, racism, psychology, cultural crises.

The desire to live in a foreign land has increased among many youngsters in today's world. Due to technological development, many have an idea of how the other developed nations are. The reality and the problem faced by immigrants does not come out. This kind of reality can be seen only through literature. Every work penned by authors like Monica Ali and Uma Parameswaran is of pure experience of the things they see around them.

Monica Ali was born in Pakistan and moved to England when she was just three years old. As a writer, she gained greater fame after the publication of her debut novel *Brick Lane*. It delves deep into the lives of the Bangladeshi community in London and reflects the issues faced by the Bangladeshi Diaspora.

Uma Parameswaran was born in Madras and settled in Winnipeg during the latter part of her life. In her play *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard Trees* she writes about the Diaspora experiences of a migrant family from India to Canada. She portrays the psychological aspects and difficulties of the people. Being immigrant themselves, Monica Ali and Uma Parameswaran hit deep the reality of foreign life. This paper explores the cultural struggles faced by the characters in *Brick Lane* and *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard Trees* and deconstructs the ideology of people who have a desire for foreign life. Cultural identity is within everyone and when it is lost, individuality fades away. According to Stuart Hall,

There are at least two different ways of thinking about 'cultural identity'. The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. (Hall 36)

Culture is a social behaviour of a particular set of society. They have their own set of rules. It is like a spectacle through which people see their lives. In Indian culture, white sari indicates a widow but the bride of western culture wears a white dress. Culture is manmade and it is found to live in harmony and avoid quarrels. When a person moves from his cultured surroundings to another, he finds it difficult to adapt it. Behavior, dressing, language, attitude, gestures, values, music, food everything differ from one culture to another. Culture has a great influence on the personality of individuals and moulds them.

Literature in the bilingual culture reflects the tension of living in a culture, which is far away from their roots. Dealing with how people have lost their identity after moving to an unknown culture is called cultural identity. Cultural identity is the question of self and culture. Culture and literature are always interlinked. As Bakhtin says,

Literature is an inseparable part of the totality of culture and cannot be studied outside the total cultural context...These factors influence culture as a whole and only through it and in conjunction with it do they affect literature. The literary process is a part of the cultural process and cannot be torn away from it. (qtd in Jola 2)

Literature reflects life so obviously, it also reflects culture. Literature can be imaginary and creative but in most of the places, it also acts as a powerful tool to show the reality of this world. *Brick Lane* and *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard Trees* show the reality of struggles faced by the migrants. Both the writers focus their attention on alienation in a foreign land and the Psyche that affects them.

To the famous Karl Marx, "Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object" (Fromm 5). It is the state in which people become lonely, worthless and get separated from all social activities. They do not feel at home and fitted to the society. This leads to psychological agony in people which makes them anti-social.

Brick Lane is about the journey of the protagonist Nazneen and her adaptation in a society far different from her own. She marries an elderly fat man Chanu when she is just eighteen and moves to Brick Lane, London from her birthplace, Pakistan. In the new century, Britain has been a multi-racial society so the immigrants find it more difficult to adapt since they are always looked upon with suspicion. Chanu says the colonial process follows him even there and the west always hates them and looks down on them. "All these people here who look down at us as peasants know nothing of history" (*Brick Lane* 185).

When Nazneen goes out in her traditional dress to Bishopsgate she feels alienated and outcaste. "Nazneen, hobbling and halting, began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination" (*Brick Lane* 56). This shows her powerlessness and kindles her inferiority complex. She becomes aware of her clothing, colour and feels embarrassed. This gives her the thought that being invisible is better than being foreign. The westerners called them "the other" and stared at them with the eye of prejudice. This can be felt when Chanu says:

'And when they jump ship and scuttle over here, then in a sense they are home again. And you see to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan. But these people are peasants. Uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition.'
(*Brick Lane* 28).

In the same way the play *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard Trees* talks about a family from India settled in Canada. The play portrays the difficulties faced by the family due to immigration. One of

their problems is alienation. There comes a situation when Sharad feels alienated and confesses it to his family.

SHARAD: (Shaking his head.) I should take the bus more often and get used to it, son. It upsets me profoundly to find myself in a crowd. All those alien faces staring at or through you. It makes me wonder. Makes me ask myself, what am I doing here? Who are these faceless people among whom my life is oozing away? Each so self-contained, so complete, looking at me as though I shouldn't be there. It's a strange, eerie feeling, all those discreetly questioning eyes that make me ask endless questions.
(*Rootless* 1.3.13)

This shows that Sharad is a perfect example of the struggles the migrants face due to alienation. As the conversation suggests, they feel isolated among the people who stare at them like an alien creature.

As Alienation is witnessed in the immigrants, Nostalgia also keeps them isolated from their neighbors. Nostalgia is a feeling of homesickness and longing for the past. The happy memory of one's childhood induces the nostalgic feeling in us, makes the mood gloomy, and makes one long for those moments. "The Greek word for "return" is *nostos*. *Algos* means "suffering." So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return"
(*Ignorance* 5).

In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* Chanu has a strong desire to move to his native land. He despises England and follows the strict traditions of his culture. At the end of the novel, he just moves to his native land even when his family did not agree to accompany him. He chose his native land over his family. This shows how much he longed for his motherland. Nazneen remembers her life in Pakistan and compares them with the life of London. "You can spread your soul over a paddy field, you can whisper to a mango tree, you can feel the earth beneath your toes and know that this is the place, the place where it begins and ends. But what can you tell to a pile of bricks? The bricks will not be moved" (*Brick Lane* 87).

The 'spread your soul over the paddy field' (*Brick Lane* 87) indicates the freedom she had in Pakistan. She was surrounded by nature and had a strong connection to it but in London all she sees is bricks.

The same sort of Nostalgia is subconsciously seen in the characters of *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard Trees*. Jayant who always talks ill about India recalls the memories he experienced there.

JAYANT. (His voice far away) Remember that mango tree in Chetan Das's yard back home? And all the raw green mangoes we stole? We never got caught once. And the lichees in Mussoorie that summer. God, they were succulent. And we never got caught then either. (*Rootless* 1.1.9)

Sharad in *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard Trees* and Chanu in *Brick Lane* act as a bridge between two cultures. When Jyoti goes to discos and comes in late nights, her mother Savitri gets worried. Sharad consoles her by saying, "The youngsters here are doing well. They have their own code of morals and they are more idealistic than we give them credit for. This disco craze is perfectly harmless." (*Rootless* 12). Chanu gets caught between two cultures and loses his respect in both Western culture and Bangladeshi community.

Nostalgia can be better understood through Kamala Das's *My Grandmother's House*. A girl who lived in a joint family with many relations when married off to a nuclear family feels nostalgic and longs for relations.

...you cannot believe, darling,

Can you, that I lived in such a house and

I was proud, and loved...I who have lost

My way and beg now at strangers' doors to

Receive love, at least in small change? (qtd in Rekha 491)

It is about a woman longing for the love she experienced in her Grandmother's house. These words show how her life has changed and how she craves for love, which she got in her childhood. These types of feeling are most severe in immigrants since they are very far away from their homeland and rarely get a chance to visit their relations.

Savitri in *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard Trees* did not lose her cultural values and tradition. Outside her house she behaves as a Western lady and once stepped inside the house she changes her costume

to a typical Indian housewife. Nazneen is a little bit different from Savitri of *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard Trees*. She struggles a lot with the culture of London. However, both parents are very much worried about their children (second generation). Unlike the first-generation parents, the children are not psychologically attached to their native land, but they find it difficult to be a foreigner and follow a culture that their ancestors do not approve of.

In *Brick Lane* Chanu's daughter, Sahana looks down on the Bangladeshi community. She has a western point of view, and she runs away the day before when they planned to move to their native land. "Does Shahana know about the Paradise of Nations? All she knows about is flood and famine. Whole bloody country is just a bloody basket case to her" (*Brick Lane* 185). Similarly, in *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard Trees*, Jayant dislikes India. He finds his father's nostalgic feeling irritating. He says, "Our people, our old country, Dad, there's no "our people" and no "old country" for anyone in the world anymore, least of all for us. This is our land and here we shall stay" (*Rootless* 2.3.34).

Since they follow the Westernized culture, parents are so much worried about their children. Chanu did not want her daughters to live in the society of drugs and addiction. As they grow up he wants to take them back to their native land so that they grow into a woman of his culture. In *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard Trees* Jyoti has an intimate relationship before getting married which was a great deal in Indian culture but not to the West. This makes Savitri feel so much worried.

Racism is a belief that their race is much superior to others. This is commonly found among the whites and coloured peoples. This sense of superiority paves the way for prejudice, hatred, and discrimination among the people. Racism starts with colour. Coloured migrants struggle a lot when they move to white society. Many do not get jobs and homes to stay in. However, everyone says 'All are equal'. In reality, many people are racists and give hardship to the others. While dealing with the topic Diaspora, racism is always linked to it.

In the novel, *Brick Lane* Chanu accuses that it is because he is dark his promotion is delayed. He calls the whites as racists. Nazneen tells her friend Razia: "My husband says they are racist, particularly Mr.

Dalloway. He thinks he will get the promotion, but it *will* take him longer than any white man. He says that if he painted his skin pink and white then there would be no problem” (*Brick Lane* 72).

In *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard* racism issue comes to even the most educated and respected people like Veejala, a scientist. “*Asked if she felt she had been discriminated against because of her sex. Dr. Moghe said, ‘I happen to be of the wrong color as well’*” (*Rootless* 2.4.39).

A healthy mind requires a healthy environment. Most of the immigrants feel lonely, unworthy and inferior. This leads to psychological problems in some cases. Since the immigrants suffer from language and culture differences, it takes time to socialize and in the meantime, they undergo many battles within themselves. The nostalgic feeling hits them right through their heart, which makes them, regret moving to a foreign land. In *Brick Lane* Nazneen sometimes dreamt the wardrobe had fallen on her, crushing her on the mattress. Sometimes she dreamt that she was locked inside it and hammered and hammered but nobody heard. This reflects the mental health of Nazneen. She is very much troubled by loneliness and wants to get away from the world. This shows the pathetic state of Nazneen.

In *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard*, Jyoti has a mental battle throughout the play. In the opening scene, she advises Jayant that he cannot fit in the society and cannot pull off his roots but, she is in a mental dilemma of choosing her lover. Andre symbolizes the western culture and Sridhar of Indian culture. She is very much confused and does not know which to choose because Andre is the one she is committed to but her parents and everyone in the society would want her to marry Sridhar. Finally, Veejala consoles Jyoti saying, “Everyone will say you are a fool to choose a long-haired, hip-type foreigner when you have a clean-cut intelligent Hindu waiting on you. But tell them that if this were India, their counterparts would be saying the same thing about Sridhar the alien southerner” (*Rootless* 3.2.45).

There are still many other problems like transportation, employment, prejudice, weather, etc... People migrate to places to earn money, to get exposure and some migrate for adventurous nature. Some people live peacefully leaving their land in contradiction to this view. They are the ones who are brave enough mentally to face all these challenges. Leaving their native land to earn money or study is not a problem but going there to settle just because of foreign desire and to boast of being an immigrant is too

foolish. Many who have gone to other Western countries have returned in months after knowing the reality. The basic principle which lies in immigration is assimilation to the new land at the same time a bond with the native land and culture should be transferred from generation to generation.

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