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Ethnic Aspects in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

Bakalářská práce

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně a uvedla úplný seznam citované a použité literatury.

V Olomouci dne

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INTRODUCTION

Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* deals with the immigrant experience in general and it leads us into the heart of East London's Bangladeshi community. This novel undoubtedly belongs to the post-war British ethnic literature and it is the primary source of this thesis.

In the first chapter I would like to present briefly the historical context of the post-Second World War Britain. I will focus mainly on the decline of the British Empire, the process of decolonization and subsequent immigration from the former colonies to the United Kingdom (the UK). Next, the themes of post-war British ethnic literature will be discussed of which the immigrant experience is the most frequent. I will also introduce several chosen authors of British ethnic fiction. At the end of the first chapter I would like to pay special attention to the author of *Brick Lane* Monica Ali including her short biography, a brief summary of the plot and reactions to the novel of critics but also of the members of London's Bangladeshi community.

In chapter two I will begin with a short outline of the waves of immigration to the UK, especially in the post-Second World War period. I would like to mention the reasons for this massive influx of immigrants into Britain after the independence of its former colonies, including the problems immigrants have to face after their arrival. The most prominent ethnic minorities in British multicultural capital will be described briefly. What follows is the portrait of London's East End which basically corresponds to the borough of Tower Hamlets. I will conclude the second chapter with a detailed profile of the Bangladeshi community which dominates London's East End since the second half of the twentieth century.

The last chapter will be devoted to the main female and male protagonists in *Brick Lane* since they are all part of East London's Bangladeshi community. I will also demonstrate the features of British Bangladeshis (discussed at the end of chapter two) on individual characters from the novel. I will examine the role of gender in the lives of the protagonists and how the gender role expectations are challenged in the novel. The profiles of the main female characters will be followed by their male counterparts. The last chapter will be concluded with the generalization of the role which men and women play in the novel.

1. THE CONTEXT OF POST-WAR ETHNIC BRITISH LITERATURE

1.1 THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In this introductory chapter I would like to present the context of the post-war British ethnic literature which includes the historical context of Britain in the second half of the 20th century, the themes explored by authors, general information about the authors of post-war British ethnic writing as well as examples of some of them, with special focus on Monica Ali, the author of the novel *Brick Lane* which is the main subject of this thesis.

To be able to explain the emergence of ethnic literature in the post-war period we need to take account of the historical development in this period. After the Second World War the British Empire was weakened, there was an increasing feeling of nationalism in the colonies which wanted to gain independence and as a result the British Empire collapsed. What followed was a series of waves of immigration from the former colonies, especially from the Indian subcontinent, the Caribbean, and Africa.

It was only in the years after 1945 that significant numbers of immigrants began to arrive from such locations as the West Indies, Africa and the Indian sub-continent. These immigrants differed from their predecessors in a number of ways. First, although they included groups of political refugees, many came not in flight but in search – of jobs, of education, of greater opportunities. [...] Second, they were visibly different, marked out by the colour of their skins. And third, because they came from countries that were either part of the old British Empire or the new Commonwealth they could claim, if not in every case British citizenship, at least the right to regard Britain as in some sense a mother country.¹

The primary text of my thesis is the novel *Brick Lane* which is concerned with the Bangladeshi community in London, therefore I would like to focus mainly on the Indian subcontinent in the following brief part devoted to the process of decolonisation and

¹ Peter Preston, "Zadie Smith and Monica Ali: Arrival and Settlement in Recent British Fiction," *Scientific-Professional Journal for Language, Literature and Cultural Studies* 5 (2007): 8, accessed January 6, 2012, doi: 10.2478/v10027-007-0001-8.

independence of India which later resulted in the creation of the independent state of Bangladesh.

Due to its weakening power and the rise of nationalist movement in the colonies, Britain underwent the process of decolonisation and subsequent cultural transformation caused by several waves of immigration from its former colonies. India was the first country to get independence after the Second World War, precisely in 1947. After several centuries of British economic and political control in India, the Indian National Congress was created and its leading figure Mahatma Gandhi contributed largely to the Indian independence by means of non-violence and passive resistance. The Indian independence was also accompanied by partition of India into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. It was not until 1971 that the independent state of Bangladesh occurred as a result of the Bangladeshi Liberation War which was largely supported by India. However, after its independence Bangladesh had to face serious problems such as: rapid growth of inhabitants, poverty, bad economic situation and frequent natural disasters. These reasons made a large number of Bangladeshis immigrate to the United Kingdom in search for better economic opportunities. “Emigration to Britain offered the prospect of a new life unthreatened by flood, famine, or the miserable poverty that was their countries’ chief legacy from imperial rule“.²

The second half of the 20th century meant for Britain firstly large influx of immigrants and secondly a period of significant cultural transformation due to mixing its own culture with the cultures of its former colonies. This cultural richness was a positive aspect, however, it also brought about serious conflicts between the British and the newcomers. “It cannot be denied that although diversity of races and cultures has contributed to the cultural richness, it has, at the same time, created significant conflicts in the society consisting of people whose ways of life are different in so many aspects“.³

Before looking at the themes of the post-war British ethnic writings I would like to recall briefly the reasons for this massive immigration to the UK as well as reasons for immigration in general. Among the reasons for leaving their home country was for example: to escape religious or political prosecution, or to escape political instability, poverty and unemployment they had to face in their own country. The main stimulus for immigration to the UK after the Second World War was the search for jobs and better economic

² Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 373.

³ Seda Arıkan and F. Gul Kocsoy, “Double Alienation in Monica Ali’s Novel Brick Lane,” *New World Sciences Academy* 5 (2010): 491, accessed January 6, 2012, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&hid=18&sid=44177c56-ff0f-4577-8d6c-f82c6271a87c%40sessionmgr14>.

opportunities. The consecutive waves of immigration to the UK, and more specifically to London, as well as the experience and status of immigrants will be dealt with in the following chapters and sub-chapters.

1.2 THEMES OF POST-WAR BRITISH ETHNIC LITERATURE

The main historical events related to the UK in the second half of the 20th century, namely the collapse of the Empire, its decolonisation and subsequent waves of immigration, get reflected in the works of post-war British authors. The ethnic themes find their source in the process of immigration and the following integration of these immigrants into the British society including the problems they have to face. This explains the reason why immigrant experience is one of the dominant themes and why the authors themselves are mainly immigrants or their descendants and they often describe their personal experience or the second-hand experience in case of the second generation immigrant writers.

The post-war British ethnic literature might also be called immigrant fiction because the immigrant often represents the protagonist of the literary work. This ethnic fiction generally deals with the immigrant experience in a multicultural society, with the place they occupy in this society and the way they are treated by the native inhabitants.

The effects of British colonialism and decolonization on the colonized people are very significant, they provoke in them a feeling of inferiority, of being the ones under British control, and the immigrants bring these feelings with them to the new country. Another serious issue is that of the culture shock caused by the differences between the immigrant's own culture and the British culture.

The immigrants struggle with the strain and fatigue derived from the new society, which affect their self-esteem and may lead to alienation; confusion in terms of role expectations, values and identity; shock resulting from the differences between the two cultures; and a sense of uprootedness and impotence resulting from an inability to function competently in the new culture.⁴

⁴ Seda Arıkan and F. Gul Kocsoy, "Double Alienation in Monica Ali's Novel Brick Lane," 491.

Evidently, another immigrant experience which gets reflected in ethnic literature is that of identity: individual, cultural and ethnic identity in particular. As soon as the immigrant comes to Britain, he/she experiences so called “identity crisis“. The problem of belonging is also common, the immigrants do not know where they belong, how long they will stay in Britain, whether they should preserve their own culture or adapt to the British culture. What makes their assimilation to the British society difficult is the fact that they are of a different ethnic origin than the British. Since they were not born and brought up in Britain which is valid at least for the first generation immigrants, they feel strangers in the UK when they arrive. The truth is that the immigrants especially from the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean look differently at first sight due to the colour of their skin and/or the way they dress. “Apart from the colonized history of black or Hindu people in Britain, their non-white origin or appearance has made them to be seen as different and so feel alienated in the British society“.⁵ Their process of integration is made difficult by many problems they have to face, which will be mentioned later in this chapter. The ethnic literature also focuses on the feelings that immigrants experience after their arrival in Britain. “The process of acculturation is characterized by loneliness, nostalgia, homesickness, uncertainty, and a sort of disconnectedness with the present that ultimately leads to a sense of alienation and isolation“.⁶ The immigrants feel nostalgia for their country of origin, they experience alienation, loneliness, disappointment and isolation. They simply feel strangers in the new country, they are frightened to make contact with the local people, they also feel they are being looked down on which does not ease their integration.

The multicultural character of the British society in the second half of the 20th century was not always perceived in a positive way. Moreover, immigrants often experienced racial prejudice and British ethnocentrism, sometimes even racist attacks. Having come to Britain for better economic opportunities, immigrants are mostly disappointed because their expectations are not fulfilled and they have to accept lower job status and they have to realize they have very little chance to ever get promoted. Moreover, the first generation of immigrants especially from the Indian subcontinent and Africa have problems with the

⁵ Seda Arian and F. Gul Kocsoy, “Double Alienation in Monica Ali’s Novel Brick Lane,” 495.

⁶ Sumita Roy, “The South Asian Diaspora: The Bengali Women’s Alienation in a Hyphenated Culture,” *NAAAS&Affiliates Conference Monographs* (Jan., 2010): 1388, accessed January 6, 2012, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&hid=18&sid=44177c56-ff0f-4577-8d6c-f82c6271a87c%40sessionmgr14>.

language barrier, some of them knowing only a few words in English. They also find it difficult to get used to the western values, culture and way of life, therefore they do not feel part of the society and they often end up being lonely and frustrated. Another common problem of immigrants are poor housing conditions. They usually live in tight communities with other people of their ethnicity and origin, situated in a particular area. Overcrowded conditions are a common issue of these communities. From the above picture we can imagine that being an immigrant in Britain is far from comfortable and convenient. One of the main protagonists of Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane*- Chanu, a Bangladeshi immigrant in London, even proclaims that being an immigrant in Britain is a tragedy because he himself lives through most of the above difficulties and all his past dreams and ideals finally fall apart.

“It's a success story,” said Chanu, exercising his shoulders. “But behind every story of immigrant success there lies a deeper tragedy.” [...] “I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family. I'm talking – “⁷

The dominant genre of the post-war ethnic literature is the novel of transformation which is also known under the German name *bildungsroman*. This genre enables the writer to follow the growth of the protagonist over a period of time. The crucial feature of this genre is the character transformation. The protagonist gains experience until he/she becomes mature and independent. Another idea of the novel of transformation is the conflict between the society and the individual since the protagonist is looking for his/her place in the society.

It is argued that the novel of transformation is a dominant form in black British literature. [...] The black British novel of transformation, it is argued here, is about the *formation* of its protagonists – but, importantly, it is also about the transformation of British society and cultural institutions. [...] Britain has experienced major transformations during the second half of the twentieth century, among them the collapse of Empire, large-scale immigration from former colonies, and multiculturalism.⁸

⁷ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, (London: Black Swan, 2004), 113.

⁸ Mark Stein, *Black British Literature*, (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2004), 13-14.

Another favourite genre of the British ethnic authors is autobiographical fiction which enables them to share their personal experience with the reader. These authors bring into British literature not only thematic innovations but also linguistic innovations.

What began in postcolonial writing as the creolization of the English language has become a process of mass literary transplantation, disaggregation, and cross-fertilization, a process that is changing the nature of what was once called English literature – or, more accurately, literature in English – at its very heart.⁹

Among these linguistic innovations belongs so called “creolization“ of the English language. The ethnic authors started using various “pidgins and patois“ from different regions of the world.

1.3 AUTHORS OF POST-WAR BRITISH ETHNIC LITERATURE

This sub-chapter will be devoted to the general characteristics of post-war British ethnic writers as well as brief information about some of them. In the end, I would like to pay special attention to Monica Ali and her novel *Brick Lane*.

After the Second World War, as has been previously noted, the British society underwent the process of cultural transformation due to large-scale immigration from the former colonies. Therefore a large number of writers of various ethnic origins emerged and they introduced into British literature new themes dealing mainly with the immigrant question. “These texts make visible and challenge racist and ethnocentric white British ideas of otherness and explore the processes that give rise to new, hybrid forms of culture and identity. They are contributing in a specifically imaginative, literary way both to understandings of identity and difference and to the wider cultural history of Britain since the Second World War“.¹⁰ Most of these authors are immigrants or their descendants, therefore their ethnic origins are as diverse as the texts they produce. The literary works by these authors are often referred to in secondary literature as the “Black British Literature“, supposedly to stress the ethnicity of writers.

⁹ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 226.

¹⁰ Chris Weedon, “Migration, Identity, and Belonging in British Black and South Asian Women’s Writing,” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* (June, 2008): 34, accessed January 18, 2011, doi: 10.1093/cww/vpn003.

The texts nurtured by this situation are marked by a degree of heterogeneity that almost resists definition. They are texts by male and female writers with African, South Asian, Indo-Caribbean, and African Caribbean backgrounds (backgrounds which could be further subdivided); writers who belong to different generations and social classes; and who are (or were) located in different geographical regions of Britain. This body of texts consists of different genres such as the novel, poetry, drama, film script and essay; texts which are written in different varieties of English, varieties born out of the interaction between distinct linguistic communities in Britain and abroad.¹¹

We distinguish between three groups of post-war ethnic writers, namely women writers, indigenous writers, and migrant writers. The first two groups were relatively overlooked until the 1970s. The third group – migrant writers are regarded as representative of postcolonial writing.¹² As for British migrant writers, they live and work in Britain while at the same time maintaining connections with their ethnic background.¹³ We further distinguish between the first generation migrant writers who were born outside of Britain and the second generation who were born in Britain. The concern of their texts is therefore going to be slightly different. “If novels that address first-generation migrant stories focus on dislocation, poverty, racism and the effects of cultural difference, fiction about growing up in Britain has a different emphasis, focusing more on questions of identity and belonging“.¹⁴

This new kind of literature brings new themes and narrative techniques but it also represents a challenge for the reader who is not always familiar with the ethnic and cultural background of the text in his hands. Although British readers share a part of their history with these migrant writers coming from former British colonies, they might still find it useful to do some additional research into the topic on their own.

In the work of such writers as Monica Ali, Hanif Kureishi, Andrea Levy, Timothy Mo, Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith, readers have been confronted with texts that challenge them in unfamiliar ways, requiring them not only to adapt to new literary

¹¹ Mark Stein, *Black British Literature*, 14.

¹² See Elleke Boehmer, 214-215.

¹³ See Elleke Boehmer, 227.

¹⁴ Chris Weedon, “Migration, Identity, and Belonging in British Black and South Asian Women’s Writing,” 28.

modes, but also to consider the experiences of distant countries and to understand and assess the part played by Britain in those countries' histories.¹⁵

In the remaining part of this chapter, I will briefly present a selected list of British ethnic authors including their ethnic background and the themes they explore in their works. Among my selected authors are four women writers: M. Ali, Z. Smith, M. Syal and A. Levy, and the male writers are the following: H. Kureishi, K. Ishiguro, T. Mo, B. Okri, C. Philips and S. Rushdie.

What all the above authors have in common is their diverse ethnic origin (other than the British) which often determines the themes, setting or the choice of characters of their works. Some of the authors belong to the first generation of immigrants, some of them are second generation immigrants of mixed origin. The immigrant experience often gets reflected in their writing. These ethnic authors explore typical themes of postcolonial fiction such as: the experience of migration, race and ethnicity, identity and belonging, the process of assimilation, and the feelings of alienation and displacement related to migration.

Concerning the male writers, their ethnic origins are really diverse. Kazuo Ishiguro comes from Japanese background. Hanif Kureishi was born to an English mother and a Pakistani father, therefore he is of mixed origin, and his most famous novel is *Buddha of Suburbia* (1990). Timothy Mo is an Anglo-Chinese novelist, his mother was English and his father Chinese. Ben Okri is of Nigerian origin; Caryl Phillips was born in the West Indies (the Caribbean). Salman Rushdie comes from India and *The Satanic Verses* (1988) is his best-known but also his most controversial novel which infuriated Muslims all around the world.

As for the female ethnic authors, all three of them are second generation immigrants to the UK. Andrea Levy was born to Jamaican parents in London. Meera Syal, who is of Pakistani origin, deals with the situation of second generation immigrants in her autobiographical novel *Anita and Me* (1996). Zadie Smith was born in Britain to an English father and a Jamaican mother, and she wrote a famous novel *White Teeth* (2000) for which she received a number of prestigious literary awards.

¹⁵ Peter Preston, "Zadie Smith and Monica Ali: Arrival and Settlement in Recent British Fiction," 7.

1.4 MONICA ALI

Monica Ali was born in Dhaka (Bangladesh) in 1967 to an English mother and a Bangladeshi father. The family moved to Bolton in north-west London when Ali was three years old. She studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Oxford. She married Simon Torrance with whom she has one son and one daughter and they currently live in South London. After the birth of her first child she began writing short stories and she started to work on her first novel after the birth of her second child. In 2003, even before the publication of her famous novel *Brick Lane*, she was listed as one of Granta's Best Young British Novelists. Despite the success of her first novel *Brick Lane*, her second novel *Alentejo Blue* (2006) was criticized for being too fragmentary and for too many characters who consequently fail to develop properly.¹⁶

Brick Lane (2003) is Ali's novel about immigrant experience, it takes its title from a street in the East End of London and puts emphasis on the Bangladeshi community living there. "But the educative function cuts both ways: if *Brick Lane* is valuable in informing its readers about Bangladeshi life in Britain, it is also comments on the nature and quality of British life and its attitude towards immigrant communities".¹⁷ The novel was also adapted for television in 2007. Although it provoked both positive and negative reactions, as will be mentioned later, Ali won W. H. Smith People's Choice Award and was shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award, the British Book Awards Literary Fiction Award and the Man Booker Prize.¹⁸

"The novel tells the story of Nazneen's life from her birth in Bangladesh in 1967, to her arrival in the East End of London in 1985, in order to marry Chanu, a much older man who has been in England for some time, and then the novel's conclusion in March 2002".¹⁹ Chanu, who has a degree from Dhaka University, works as a government clerk but when he realizes that he has no chance for promotion, he leaves his job and must work as a taxi driver. With Nazneen they live in a council flat in East London which she rarely leaves. Slowly, Nazneen starts to associate with other Bangladeshi women from the community, she learns a

¹⁶ See Alastair Horne, "Ali, Monica, 1967-," *Literature Online Biography*, accessed January 6, 2012, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO028609&divLevel=0&trailId=13524682714&area=ref&forward=critref_ft.

¹⁷ Peter Preston, "Zadie Smith and Monica Ali: Arrival and Settlement in Recent British Fiction," 17.

¹⁸ See Peter Preston, 9.

¹⁹ Peter Preston, 15.

few words in English and later, she even works at home. Their first child dies when still small, later they have two daughters, Bibi and Shahana. The turning point of the story comes when Nazneen starts a passionate relationship with Karim, a young Muslim who brings batches of garments for her to work on at home. Chanu gradually becomes disillusioned with England and plans to return to Bangladesh with his family to preserve the values of his homeland. However, Nazneen decides not to join her husband because she realizes that her daughters feel at home in England and she wants to develop an independent life herself. The narrative is frequently interrupted by letters from Nazneen's sister Hasina who stayed in Bangladesh. The story of her decline starts when she runs away from home with her lover at the age of sixteen and she slowly slips down the social ladder until she is even forced to make her living by prostitution. These letters enable Nazneen to keep in touch with her country of origin and they also inform the reader about the current development in Bangladesh.²⁰

Although the novel was generally praised, it was also criticized by the British Bangladeshis for the “insulting“ and “shameful“ portrayal of their community in London's East End. Ali's right to speak on their behalf was also questioned mainly due to her lack of first-hand experience.²¹

The number of literary awards that Ali received for her first novel sufficiently prove its high quality. I would like to quote a few reviews from the cover of the 2004 Black Swan edition of the novel.

In the following review another British ethnic author Meera Syal points out the qualities of Ali's novel. “Monica Ali is a fabulous writer, and Brick Lane is finely observed, deeply compassionate, wry and tender“. (Meera Syal)

According to Margaret Forster (a British novelist and literary critic) the novel is special because it combines a serious tone with a comic one. She also appreciates that it leads us into the heart of London's Bangladeshi community presenting their life and culture in a fascinating way. “A very special novel – I adored it. It gave me everything I crave in a novel, taking me into a life and culture I know so little about...entertaining, moving and fascinating“. (Margaret Forster)

²⁰ See Peter Preston, 15.

²¹ See See Alastair Horne, “Ali, Monica, 1967-“.

“Monica Ali’s first novel, *Brick Lane*, exposes a hidden world and allows the reader a detailed and fascinating glimpse into British Bengali culture. Ian Jack noted, when he explained why the Granta panel had included Ali in their list of the 20 most promising young British novelists, that her prose brings us “news“ about contemporary Britain in a way that only fiction can. I certainly feel more informed about the people who are my next-door neighbours than I did before I read this book“. (New Statesman)²² Ian Jack, a Scottish journalist, mentions two achievements of Ali’s novel: that it provides an image of contemporary Britain (including its current issues) and it allows the reader to learn more about the British Bengali culture and therefore understand better their way of life.

²² Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, (London: Black Swan, 2004).

2. THE HISTORY OF BRICK LANE AS A LONDON SUBURB

In this chapter I would like to outline the successive waves of immigration to the UK including a brief account of the British immigration policies. I would also like to recall the problems immigrants coming to UK have to face of which racism is the main issue. Then I will provide a brief description of the most prominent ethnic communities living in London as well as a brief history of London's East End, including its famous street Brick Lane. It is situated in London's borough of Tower Hamlets and it is considered to be a residential area of immigrants who have not settled in Britain fully yet. *Brick Lane* is also associated with poor housing conditions, poverty, crime, and drug abuse, for which reasons it is not a desirable place to live. In the last part of this chapter, I am going to make a detailed profile of the Bangladeshi community which dominates London's East End.

2.1 WAVES OF IMMIGRATION TO THE UK

“Do you know how many immigrant populations have been here before us? In the eighteenth century the French Protestants fled here, escaping Catholic persecution. They were silk weavers. They made good. One hundred years later, the Jews came. They thrived. At the same time, the Chinese came as merchants. The Chinese are doing very well.”²³

In the above quotation one of the main protagonists of *Brick Lane* Chanu gives us a simplified account of the main waves of immigration to the UK. One of the earliest waves took place in the late 17th century when the French Protestant Huguenots fled from the Catholic persecution. They were followed in the 18th century by the Irish and black slaves from the Caribbean. In the 19th century the first wave of Jewish immigrants arrived from Eastern Europe which was followed in the 1930s by another wave from Nazi Germany. Migration from the Indian subcontinent was quite a late phenomenon because it started in the post-Second World War period when the former British colonies gained independence. The Bangladeshis, who settled mainly in the East End of London, started coming to Britain in the 1950s and the 1960s. In the following decade Bangladeshi women were arriving in order to

²³ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, 463-464.

join their husbands, contributing to the establishment of a permanent Bangladeshi community in Britain.

As far as the British immigration policies are concerned, there were three crucial legislative acts issued in the course of the twentieth century whose aim was to control the influx of immigrants into the UK. The British Nationality Act (1948) supported immigration from the former colonies in order to fill the gap in the labour market, these immigrants were mostly unskilled workers. However, since then Britain witnessed mass immigration which soon got out of its control and as a result, legislation restricting the influx of unskilled workers had to be passed. The Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962) allowed into Britain only those immigrants who possessed special skills, actually stopping the entry of unskilled immigrants. The Immigration Act of 1971 required immigrants to have a close connection to the UK through birth or ancestry in order to acquire British citizenship and it actually ended all primary immigration.²⁴

We distinguish between three categories of immigrants. The first category are primary labour migrants who come to Britain to find a job and search for a better living standard in general. The second group are dependants of these primary labour migrants, also called secondary immigrants, they are the wives and children of male primary migrants. The third group are political refugees who escape political persecution of their home country, among others we can mention the French Protestants or the Jewish immigrants.²⁵

I would like to introduce briefly the Bangladeshi community at this point because many of the following characteristics are applicable to other immigrant communities as well. The early immigrants usually came to Britain to find work and achieve a better standard of living or they wanted to escape political conflict and instability in their home country. These early immigrants were often poorly educated, illiterate, they spoke little English and did not possess any special working skills. Most of the Bangladeshi immigrants came from the Sylhet region, situated in the north-east of today's Bangladesh, and they settled in London's East End, especially the borough of Tower Hamlets. They were employed mainly in the textile industry. Unlike the first generation immigrants, the second generation Bangladeshis aspire to professional careers, actively engaging in local politics and acquiring higher qualifications.

Once immigrants arrived to the UK, they had to face a number of problems which undoubtedly made their integration difficult or sometimes even impossible. The problem number one was widespread racism of the British society. Immigrants were perceived as

²⁴ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, 382-385.

²⁵ Shamit Sagar, *Race and Politics in Britain*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 48-49.

inferior and they were generally seen as a problem while the real problem was the prejudice of the British society. “The term “immigrant“ seems to denote a person who is alien, probably unable to speak English, with different and possibly inferior ways of life and perhaps implicitly, a threat to the existence or the continuance of the “British way of life“.²⁶ Another serious issue related to racism is that of discrimination; immigrants were discriminated in employment, housing and education which provoked in them a feeling of bitter disappointment.

The first generation Asian immigrant in Britain...was not used to the mores and practices of an industrialized society. His presence was resented, and he suffered racist insults and indignities. He was denied a decent house and job commensurate with his abilities. He was often not promoted to a higher position...The Asian immigrants are predictably frightened and bewildered. They are haunted by a sense of impending tragedy.²⁷

Moreover, in the 1970s black immigrants were under constant attack of fascists and police. They had to defend themselves, therefore they formed various militant black organizations. “The rebellion of black youth in the inner cities was the logical and, as is now clear, inevitable response to racist attacks. It was the culmination of years of harassment. Its message was simply: “We have had enough.“²⁸

Apart from the problems of racism and discrimination, the second generation immigrants experience problems of identity and belonging. Most of them were born and educated in Britain, however, they were brought up by their parents in the traditional background. This young generation tends to identify themselves as British, however, they never fully integrate into the society because they are different in terms of their appearance, customs, values and their way of life in general. Nevertheless, they lack the kind of link to their ancestral country since most of them have not been there before and they know it only from their parents.

We are different from our parents in many ways. The only home we know is Britain...
All the statutory and voluntary white agencies have now adopted the white race

²⁶ Seda Arikan and F. Gul Kocsoy, “Double Alienation in Monica Ali’s Novel Brick Lane,” 493.

²⁷ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, 376.

²⁸ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, 395.

experts' label – “second generation immigrants“ – for black Britons. By the use of such labelling devices the vicious circle of racial discrimination becomes institutionalized and perpetuated. Merely because of the colour of their skin, black children become second-class citizens, doomed to a life of ostracism, exploitation, difference...²⁹

2.2 ETHNIC MINORITIES IN LONDON

“One clear element of change after 1945 relates to the spatial concentration of immigrants and refugees. A survey carried out at the end of the Second World War would have revealed the concentration of these groups in a limited number of locations. London has traditionally acted as a magnet for them“.³⁰ London has become an ethnically diverse city as a result of the legacy of the British Empire, namely the waves of immigration from its former colonies especially after the Second World War. I have chosen three prominent groups of immigrants: the Jewish, the South-Asian (the Indian and the Pakistani), and Eastern Europeans. The Bangladeshi community, dominating London's East End, will be discussed separately at the end of this chapter.

The larger-scale Jewish immigration took place in the 19th and 20th centuries and it peaked between 1881-1945. The first wave of Jewish immigrants came to Britain from eastern Europe and Russia, those from Russia wanted to escape the attacks on them following the assassination of tsar Alexander II in 1881. The second wave occurred mainly during the interwar period. This time Jews fled from the Nazi Germany to the UK.³¹ The Jewish immigrants settled mainly in London's East End where they worked in commercial activity or garment industry. Generally, they performed high levels of educational and professional achievement and they managed to integrate well into the British society, therefore they started to move out of the East End into more desirable areas, mainly to North London. The East London's Jewish community was replaced by the Bangladeshis in the second half of the 20th century.

The South-Asian immigrants include the Indians, the Pakistanis and the Bangladeshis, which means those from the countries which gained independence after the Second World War. Therefore, this New Commonwealth settlement is a post-war phenomenon which

²⁹ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, 390.

³⁰ Terry Gourvish and Alan O'Day, *Britain since 1945*, (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1991), 216.

³¹ See Shomit Sagar, *Race and Politics in Britain*, 25-29.

peaked between the 1950s-1970s. Concerning the Bangladeshis, 57% of them entered Britain between 1975-1984 which might be explained by the fact that Bangladesh became an independent state in 1971 compared to Indian and Pakistani independence in 1947. The numerical dominance of the immigrants from the Indian subcontinent is claimed to be caused by the broad pattern of migration in the years 1950-1970 and by relatively high birth rates of immigrant women.³² The Pakistanis are Muslims speaking Punjabi or Urdu. They are largely concentrated in North East, West and South West London. They are said to be highly educated compared to other South-Asian immigrants, a large number of those who entered Britain in the 1960s were qualified Teachers, Doctors or Engineers. The Indian community is London's largest non-white ethnic community whose highest concentration can be found in West London. Many also reside in the East and South London. As opposed to the Muslim Pakistanis, the Indians are predominantly Hindu. This religious clash already led to the partition into two separate states of India and Pakistan in 1947.

As far as immigrants from Eastern Europe are concerned, their history in Britain dates back to the end of the 19th century when Polish and Russian Jews fled from European pogroms and settled in East London. They were followed in the 1930s by German Jews coming to Britain to escape nazism. In the upheavals at the end of World War II a new wave of refugees from central Europe arrived in the UK. After the war immigrants from Poland came due to economic and political instability in Eastern Europe and they established their community in West London. They are the most numerous group of the Eastern European immigrants in London.³³ The flow of immigrants from Eastern Europe continues even in the 21st century. Recently, economic migrants have been coming to the UK from Central and East European countries which joined the European Union (the EU) after 2000. The access to the EU gave them the right to work in the UK. Among these immigrants belong the Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Hungarians, Romanians, and others.³⁴

2.3 LONDON'S EAST END

The area of London's East End approximately corresponds to the borough of Tower Hamlets with the famous street Brick Lane, the area almost entirely inhabited by immigrant

³² See Shomit Sagar, *Race and Politics in Britain*, 46-51.

³³ See *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, "London," accessed March 28, 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/346821/London>.

³⁴ See John Eade, "Economic Migrant or Hyphenated British? Writing about difference in London's East End," accessed March 28, 2012, www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiacities/assets/London/.

settlers. “In the novel, the area Brick Lane becomes representative of a holding area, a temporary zone for immigrants, who have not yet fully settled in England“.³⁵ Brick Lane is often referred to as “a melting pot“ where different cultures and religions meet. Nowadays Brick Lane is nicknamed London’s “curry capital“ or “Banglatown“ because the dominant population are the Bangladeshis who replaced the former Jewish community.

Getting to know Brick Lane was like going back into history – from the days of the Romans, then the French Huguenots in the 18th century, to the Jews in the early 19th century and later Bangladeshis, Indians and the rest. Today, Brick Lane is Banglatown. The area is known for many things – being labelled London’s heart of darkness and hotbed of crime and extreme poverty.³⁶

There are many negative aspects associated with this area of London such as crime, poverty, drug addiction, class-conflict, overcrowding, racial violence and others. Housing conditions can be simply described as poor and cramped. Moreover, in the 1970s there were violent racial conflicts. “Back in the 1970s, racial tension was in the air. Gangs of skinheads rampaged through the area attacking coloured people and destroying their properties“.³⁷ “Brick Lane in the Seventies was a dirty, unattractive place, deserted after 6pm. Today it has come to life. We used to be too scared to go out at night because National Front would beat us up, but today our community is strong and nobody would dare attack us“.³⁸ Nowadays, Brick Lane is characterized as a vibrant street with Bangladeshi curry houses, sari stores and mosques. “It is just a slice of everyday banter on Brick Lane, surely London’s most vibrant street, where the air is permeated by exotic spices, bhangra music beats out a backing soundtrack, and the last vestiges of the Jewish past and the Bangladeshi present rub along like brothers“.³⁹ What the inhabitants appreciate on Brick Lane is the “trust and intimacy“ of the community. The diversity of Brick Lane is also discussed in the novel *On Brick Lane* by Rachel Lichtenstein who compares the street’s “vanished past“ with its “fashionable present“.⁴⁰

³⁵ Seda Arikian and F. Gul Kocsoy, “Double Alienation in Monica Ali’s Novel Brick Lane,” 491.

³⁶ Johan Jaaffar, “A Story of Blood, Sweat and Integration,” *New Straits Times Press, Ltd.* (Jan., 2011): 18, accessed January 6, 2012, <http://search.proquest.com/docvič/848261724?accountid=16730>.

³⁷ Johan Jaaffar, “A Story of Blood, Sweat and Integration,” 18.

³⁸ David Cohen, “The New Brick Lane, East London’s Famous Street Has Transformed from Poor Immigrant Quarter to New Fashionability,” *Associated Newspapers Ltd.* (Sep., 2007): 2, accessed January 6, 2012, <http://search.proquest.com/docvič/330092077?accountid=16730>.

³⁹ David Cohen, “The New Brick Lane,” 1.

⁴⁰ See David Cohen, “The New Brick Lane,” 1.

The novel *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali is set in East London's borough of Tower Hamlets, not far from the street Brick Lane which is the setting place of many of its outdoor scenes. Nevertheless, the novel primarily focuses on a few representatives of the Bangladeshi community who together evoke the particular atmosphere of London's East End. That is also the reason why in the following part I would like to pay special attention to the Bangladeshi community and the various aspects of their life in London because the people living there have shaped Brick Lane into its present form.

2.4 THE BANGLADESHI COMMUNITY

In this subchapter I would like to present a detailed profile of the Bangladeshi community living in the UK, focusing on several chosen areas of their life such as history, religion and language, geographical distribution, employment, housing, links with the country of origin (Bangladesh), young people, women and portrayal in media. At the same time, I will be referring to the novel *Brick Lane*, demonstrating the above phenomena on particular characters who all belong to the East London's Bangladeshi community. Therefore, we will be able to consider to what extent Monica Ali's portrayal of the community corresponds to the results of research in this field.

Bangladeshis started arriving in Britain as early as 1850s, they were seamen of British merchant navies who jumped the ship in the UK to settle in London, Liverpool or Bristol. They were accompanied by naval cooks from the Sylhet region. Most of these early settlers got married to the local women and established their families in the host country. The first descendants of Bangladeshis were therefore of mixed race. Another major wave of Bangladeshi immigration occurred during the 1950s and 1960s due to economic hardship in East Pakistan, these immigrants came to Britain in search of employment and better economic opportunities. In the 1970s there were two major reasons for Bangladeshi immigration, namely political instability in Bangladesh after the independence and family reunification which started already in the late 1960s.⁴¹

Most of the Bangladeshi immigrants who came to the UK, settled in London. Their highest concentration is found in the borough of Tower Hamlets in East London. They have dominated this area since the 1970s replacing the former Jewish community. "The

⁴¹ See *The Bangladeshi Muslim Community in England: Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities*, (London: Communities and Local Government, 2009), 24-25, accessed January 6, 2012, www.swadhinata.org.uk/dokument/Bangladeshi_Muslim.pdf.

Bangladeshi Muslim community is the most concentrated and ethnically segregated Muslim community in England, with 43% per cent of the population concentrated in only seven London boroughs⁴² “Nearly half of the London Bangladeshis are found in the single Borough of Tower Hamlets, which hosts a quarter of the total Bangladeshis living in the UK⁴³”.

As far as religion is concerned, 92% of Bangladeshis living in England classify themselves as Muslim.⁴⁴ Bangladesh, originally East Pakistan, is traditionally Muslim because Pakistan as a whole separated from Hindu India in 1947 on the religious basis. Therefore, Bangladeshis coming to the UK preserve their religious faith. In the East End of London, there are three mosques serving the Bangladeshis, the largest of which is the East London Mosque in Tower Hamlets.

The official language spoken in Bangladesh is Bangla (Bengali). The main language spoken by the Bangladeshis in the UK is Sylheti which is said to be a dialect of Bengali.⁴⁵ The very first Bangladeshi immigrants often could not speak a word in English before they came to the UK. On the other hand, especially the second generation immigrants who are brought up and educated in Britain, learn English daily at school, therefore they do not have problems with understanding and communication unlike their parental generation.

In terms of unemployment, Bangladeshis in Britain show the highest rate of unemployment among other minority groups. Their unemployment rate is also above the national average. “Bangladeshis in England experience disproportionately high rates of unemployment. Bangladeshi men and women are under-represented in the labour market and unemployment and economic inactivity rates are significantly above the national average⁴⁶”. Those who manage to find work often have to accept a lower job status which corresponds neither to their education nor their skills. Self-employment is also a common way of earning money for the Bangladeshis. “Bangladeshi households are much more likely to be reliant on earnings from self-employment than other ethnic groups⁴⁷”. Regarding the employment of women, there are several problems they have to face: language barrier, discrimination and religious and cultural constraints from within the man-dominated community which restricts their involvement in employment but also in education. It is assumed that if a Bangladeshi

⁴² *The Bangladeshi Muslim Community in England*, 28.

⁴³ Tasneem Siddiqui, *Institutionalizing Diaspora Linkage: The Emigrant Bangladeshis in UK and USA*, (Dhaka: International Organization for Migration, 2004), 30, accessed January 6, 2012, www.samren.net/Research_Papers/doc/.

⁴⁴ See *The Bangladeshi Muslim Community in England*, 7.

⁴⁵ See *The Bangladeshi Muslim Community in England*, 44.

⁴⁶ *The Bangladeshi Muslim Community in England*, 6.

⁴⁷ *The Bangladeshi Muslim Community in England*, 6.

woman has to work, the husband has failed in earning enough money to support his family. However, the situation in the UK labour market is completely different from that in Bangladesh. In the novel, the protagonist's husband Chanu, who has been living in London for sixteen years, expresses his bitter disappointment with his job opportunities and promotion prospects. After leaving his job as a clerk, in spite of having a degree from the Dhaka University, he is forced to work as a taxi driver. In the following quotation he is talking about the dreams and ideals he had when he first came to Britain and how they gradually fell apart.

“When I came I was a young man. I had ambitions. Big dreams. When I got off the aeroplane I had my degree certificate in my suitcase and a few pounds in my pocket. I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me. I was going to join the Civil Service and become Private Secretary to the Prime Minister. [...] That was my plan. 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.”⁴⁸

Although Bangladeshi women are not supposed to work because it is believed to bring shame on the husband as well as on the whole family, the protagonist Nazneen has to start working at home in order to help her husband earn money for the journey back to their home country. In Bangladeshi culture, men work and women stay at home to take care of the children and the household. However, their situation significantly changes in Britain since male Bangladeshi immigrants are often unable to support the whole family from their salary mainly due to discrimination in employment, therefore women are forced to start working as well (self-employment is the most common way of earning money).

The major problem of Bangladeshi housing in the UK is overcrowding. “In 2001, 44 per cent of Bangladeshi households were classified as “overcrowded“, the highest among any ethnic group, and considerably higher than the UK average of seven per cent. According to the Census, the average Bangladeshi Muslim household size is 4.6 people, the highest of any ethnic group”.⁴⁹ In the following quotation by Chanu, he is complaining about the overcrowding in Tower Hamlets and he points out the problem of high birth rates within the community.

⁴⁸ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, 34.

⁴⁹ *The Bangladeshi Muslim Community in England*, 35.

“Three point five people to one room. That’s the council statistic,” Chanu told Nazneen. “All crammed together. They can’t stop having children, or they bring over all their relatives and pack them in like little fish in a tin. It’s a Tower Hamlets official statistic: three point five Bangladeshis to one room.”⁵⁰

In the above quotation we can see that the statistic concerning housing in the Bangladeshi community is really alarming. The two main issues are: high rate of overcrowding and poor housing conditions. These problems mainly stem from high unemployment, high birth rates, and family reunification (bringing their relatives to Britain). As a result, Bangladeshis are unable to achieve better housing conditions, and they are forced to stay crammed in their small flats.

I would also like to look at an interesting issue of the intergenerational conflict between the first generation and second generation Bangladeshi immigrants in Britain. There are two main areas in which their attitudes differ dramatically: linkage to their country of origin and gender expectations associated with the traditional roles of men and women in the Bangladeshi community. The first generation immigrants naturally feel a stronger attachment to Bangladesh because it is the country they were born and brought up in. However, the second generation feels differently about their identity: many of them were born in Britain and they have not been to their parents’ home country before, therefore they usually identify themselves as British Bangladeshis. “The older generation is more concerned about retaining its cultural heritage, whereas the younger people suggest that they do not necessarily want to retain this cultural identity but want to focus on their life and circumstances in Britain.”⁵¹ The first generation Bangladeshis tend to maintain both family and financial links with Bangladesh because many of them participated in the Bangladeshi Liberation War, they left their relatives behind, so they still feel strongly attached to their home country. The early immigrants also assumed that their life in Britain would be only temporary and they would come back as soon as they earned enough money, however, for many of them their return became a dream unlikely to come true.

As with other early immigrant communities from the Indian subcontinent that arrived in the UK during the post-Second World War period, the first significant generation of

⁵⁰ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, 49.

⁵¹ *The Bangladeshi Muslim Community in England*, 45.

Bangladeshis assumed that their lives in Britain were temporary and that they would return and settle in Bangladesh after making enough money.⁵²

The first generation Bangladeshis often keep financial links with their country of origin in the form of so called “remittances“. “Remittances are sent to poor relatives in Bangladesh to help them either survive or migrate, as well as for religious purposes“. ⁵³ Monica Ali also refers to this financial support sent to Bangladesh in her novel, as will be mentioned later in this subchapter.

The first and second generation migrants do not feel differently only about their country of origin but also about the gender roles in the Bangladeshi culture. Although the new generation is brought up by Bangladeshi parents according to the Bangladeshi traditions and principles, they live in the liberal British society, go to British schools, associate with British people, therefore they prefer the freedom Britain offers them to the strict cultural prescriptions of their own culture. “There are role expectations with regards to people’s gender and this expectation conflicts with the expectations of the mainstream or majority population. The older generation have the outdated view that women belong in the homes, whereas the younger generation feel differently and think differently“. ⁵⁴

The intergenerational conflict plays a crucial role in *Brick Lane*. This particular conflict takes place between Nazneen and Chanu and their two daughters Bibi and Shahana. Although Chanu does his best to preserve the cultural link with Bangladesh through telling his daughters about its rich history and culture, even making them to recite a poem by a Bengali poet Tagore, Bibi and Shahana refuse to return to Bangladesh. From the following quotation we can deduce Shahana’s approach to Bangladeshi customs and traditions, especially those related to women such as arranged marriage or confinement of women at home.

“Just wait until you are in Bangladesh,“ said Shahana. “You’ll be married off in no time. Bibi said: “But...but...“ “And your husband will keep you locked up in a little smelly room and make you weave carpets all day long.“ Bibi jumped up. “What about you? You are older than me. You will have a husband before me.“⁵⁵

⁵² *The Bangladeshi Muslim Community in England*, 56.

⁵³ *The Bangladeshi Muslim Community in England*, 57.

⁵⁴ *The Bangladeshi Muslim Community in England*, 46.

⁵⁵ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, 395.

As far as sending remittances is concerned, we can find a few cases in the novel. The protagonist Nazneen puts aside some money regularly to send it to her sister Hasina who stayed in Bangladesh. Nazneen's friend Razia keeps complaining about her husband who sends money to his home village in Bangladesh for building a new mosque there.

Another interesting phenomenon discussed in the novel is the so called "Going Home Syndrome" which Dr. Azad discusses with Chanu during one of their personal conversations. They describe the immigrants from the village who never get used to the urban life in London, who never really leave their home from the emotional and mental point of view and who hope that one day, when they save enough money for the journey, they will return home.

"These people are basically peasants and they miss the land. The pull of the land is stronger even than the pull of blood." [...] "They don't ever really leave home. Their bodies are here but their hearts are back there. And anyway, look how they live: just recreating the villages here."⁵⁶

In this part I would like to focus on the position of Bangladeshi women in their strictly patriarchal society because the novel is largely based on these clearly defined gender roles as opposed to the liberal western culture and independence of British women. Bangladeshi women who come to Britain with their husbands, do not work, they cannot speak English, they are completely unfamiliar with the British culture, they live confined to their homes and the only people they associate with are other members of their community. In this man-dominated community, women are dependent on their husbands, they must not involve in education or employment, their main role is to stay at home and take care of the children. They usually do not have any opportunity to integrate into the western society and become independent or successful.

All the above phenomena are omnipresent in the novel since it focuses on Bangladeshi women (especially the protagonist Nazneen) and their gradual "coming to independence" in the British society. We can observe how they manage to break free from the oppressive attitudes of the Bangladeshi community and how they gain personal freedom. The novel also depicts their transformation from submissive housewives into independent and self-sufficient women. However, there are many obstacles they have to overcome. In *Brick Lane* we can clearly observe the oppressive attitude towards women in several key areas of their lives such

⁵⁶ Ali, 32.

as employment, language (related to communication in general), religion or confinement. “In the novel, Monica Ali focuses on the way women are disadvantaged in terms of limited career opportunities, greater domestic responsibilities and less freedom to pursue leisure activities“.⁵⁷ In the following account my focus will be on the protagonist Nazneen who gradually manages to break free from the cultural prescriptions and oppressive attitudes of her culture. Although Nazneen’s husband Chanu claims that he is such an educated man and she can be grateful that she married him, Nazneen feels oppressed because she cannot leave home and associate with other women from the community, she actually feels like a prisoner. However, Chanu always has his arguments prepared to persuade her that her situation is basically much better than it would be if she stayed in Bangladesh.

“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.“ [...] “Besides, I get everything for you that you need from the shops.“ [...] “I don’t stop you from doing anything. I am westernized now. It is lucky for you that you married an educated man.“ [...] “And anyway, if you were in Bangladesh you would not go out. Coming here you are not missing anything, only broadening your horizons.“⁵⁸

Nazneen who can say only “sorry“ and “thank you“ in English, suggests that she would like to attend English courses with her friend Razia. However, Chanu does not pay much attention to this proposal and he tells Nazneen that she does not need it anyway. “ ‘I would like to learn some English, ‘ said Nazneen. Chanu puffed his cheeks and spat the air out in a *fuff*. ‘It will come, don’t worry about it. Where’s the need anyway?’ He looked at his book and Nazneen watched the screen.“⁵⁹

This attitude of Bangladeshi men towards women often creates communication barriers between the woman and the rest of the society. The women therefore feel isolated, alienated and inferior to their husbands. One of the novel’s characters, Dr. Azad’s wife talks about the clash between western and eastern culture and she contrasts the life of independent British women with that of submissive Bangladeshi women. She actually mocks the strict cultural restrictions imposed on them.

⁵⁷ Seda Arikian and F. Gul Kocsoy, “Double Alienation in Monica Ali’s Novel Brick Lane,“ 500.

⁵⁸ Ali, 45.

⁵⁹ Ali, 37.

“Listen, when I’m in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work. I work with white girls and I’m just one of them. If I want to come home and eat curry, that’s my business. Some women spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English.”⁶⁰

This total obedience and submission of Bangladeshi women stems from their faith which orders them to accept things as they are and never try to change anything in their lives. Nazneen was also taught this principle that nothing could be changed. “What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life.”⁶¹

As far as young British Bangladeshis are concerned, they experience serious problems which are undoubtedly related to unemployment and identity crisis. These problems are criminality, drug addiction, alcoholism, street gangs, violence and many others. The young Bangladeshis also tend to complain about the lack of youth organizations and recreational activities that would appeal to their generation.

Despite progress, youth unemployment remains a pressing problem and is seen as one of the key factors contributing to growing problems of alienation, drug use and criminality. Drug use and abuse by young people have become a significant issue in the community and this situation is perceived as getting steadily worse.⁶²

The problem of drug addiction is discussed in the novel by Dr. Azad who is interested in the problems of the Bangladeshi community in London. He wonders how the parents of drug addicts fail to recognize the symptoms when they are so obvious. He also stresses the importance of more drug counsellors and more jobs for the young.

“It’s really quite alarming,” said the doctor, “that the rate of increase of heroin abuse in our community should have exploded, and yet the elders are giving no leadership. And the funding for counsellors and out-reach workers and so forth is totally inadequate.” [...] “Teach them to spot the signs in their own children. Tiny pupils,

⁶⁰ Ali, 114.

⁶¹ Ali, 16.

⁶² *The Bangladeshi Muslim Community in England*, 47.

shallow breathing, constipation, constant need for money, becoming withdrawn, secretive. Sometimes I wonder how the parents fail to see it.“ [...] “It was bad enough when it was alcohol, “ said the doctor. “Now I wish it was only alcohol. We need two things. More drug counsellors and more jobs for the young people.”⁶³

I would like to devote this final part to the portrayal of Bangladeshi Muslims in the British media. The Bangladeshis living in Britain complain about the anti-Muslim bias in the media, they say that they are presented as violent, unassimilated terrorists. There is a lot of generalization about Bangladeshi Muslims in the media.

The portrayal of Muslims in the media is a cause for great anger and the key cause for complaint. Almost all the respondents believed that there is a lot of anti-Muslim bias in the media and that it focuses on a small problematic minority while completely ignoring the majority who are in fact apolitical and law abiding.⁶⁴

In *Brick Lane* we can find several references to this anti-Muslim bias, for example after the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York there was a rise in hatred towards Muslim communities in Britain (including London). They were all considered to provoke conflicts and spread hatred. Since then, in the eyes of the British, Muslim became a synonym for terrorist. “ ‘Islamic terrorists. Islamic terrorists. That’s all you hear. You never hear Catholic terrorist, do you? Or Hindu terrorist? What about Jewish terrorist?’ “⁶⁵ There is also a cultural and religious conflict going on between the young Bangladeshi Muslims and the British in the form of a leaflet war and a subsequent protest march. The two groups called Bengal Tigers (Muslim) and Lion Hearts (British) exchange insulting leaflets and try to intimidate each other. Below are some examples of the leaflets exchanged by the two activist groups with the help of which we can imagine how they treat each other’s culture. The first two leaflets are sent by Lion Hearts and the third one is a reaction of Bengal Tigers.

Should we be forced to put up with this? When the truth is that it is a religion of hate and intolerance. When Muslim extremists are planning to turn Britain into an Islamic Republic, using

⁶³ Ali, 247-249.

⁶⁴ *The Bangladeshi Muslim Community in England*, 53.

⁶⁵ Ali, 407.

*a combination of immigration, high birth rates and conversion.*⁶⁶

HANDS OFF OUR BREASTS!

*The Islamification of our neighbourhood has gone too far.
A Page 3 calendar and poster have been removed from the
walls of our community hall.*

*How long before the extremists are putting veils on our
women and insulting our daughters for wearing short
skirts?*

*Do not tolerate it! Write to the council! This is England!*⁶⁷

*We refer to a leaflet put recently into circulation by those
who claim to uphold the “native“ culture. We have a
message for them.*

KEEP YOUR BREASTS TO YOURSELF.

*And we say this. It is not us who like to degrade women by
showing their body parts in public places.*⁶⁸

In this chapter I have tried to outline the waves of immigration to the UK, I have chosen a few ethnic minorities settled in London, I have briefly characterized London's East End which is currently dominated by the Bangladeshi community. The last part was devoted entirely to the Bangladeshi immigrants in England, I have tried to create their detailed profile focusing on the history of their immigration, their culture (including the position of women in the Bangladeshi society), religion, the problems they have to face in the UK (including the young generation) and so forth. The purpose was to characterize the British Bangladeshis in order to follow easily the evolution of the main female and male protagonists of *Brick Lane* in the following chapter who all belong to the London's Bangladeshi community.

⁶⁶ Ali, 251.

⁶⁷ Ali, 257.

⁶⁸ Ali, 258.

3. THE MAIN FEMALE AND MALE PROTAGONISTS IN *BRICK LANE*

3.1 THE ROLE OF GENDER IN THE NOVEL

The story takes place at the heart of the East London's Bangladeshi community and all the characters are British Bangladeshis. The "white" Londoners are seen from a distance, we read about them only when one of the characters meets them in the street. [...] "The novel takes place almost entirely within the Bangladeshi community. White people exist at a distance: seen, commented on, but never encountered".⁶⁹ Almost all the protagonists represent first generation Bangladeshi immigrants with the exception of their children who were already born in Britain. In the following part I will comment on the genre of this novel and I will examine the role which gender plays in the lives of its protagonists.

Although the Bangladeshi Muslim community is traditionally man-dominated and it is based on strict gender role expectations, these conventions are gradually overcome in the novel and women become the ones in control of their own lives. *Brick Lane* is considered to be a feminized text because female characters emancipate and achieve success in the course of the novel while their male counterparts end up defeated, deprived of their dreams and ideals. The women characters, namely Nazneen and Razia, manage to break free from their community's cultural constraints and prescribed gender roles and they stand up for themselves. The most prominent feminist feature is represented by the emancipation of the protagonist Nazneen. After a series of small rebellions she finally learns to make her own decisions. "The novel traces Nazneen's lifting subjectivity and gradual emancipation from total compliance with conservative diasporic Bangladeshi norms of femininity, which are reinforced by religion and a strong belief in fate".⁷⁰ The female characters in the novel are presented as morally strong and they manage to adapt and integrate into the British society. On the contrary, male characters, namely Chanu and Karim, fail in their attempt to achieve success in Britain and unable to cope with their failure they escape to Bangladesh. It seems that the success of female characters parallels the failure of male characters as we can observe in the case of the protagonist Nazneen and her husband Chanu. "It is important at this point to

⁶⁹ Peter Preston, 16.

⁷⁰ Chris Weedon, 18.

realize that the growth and evolution of Nazneen's identity parallels the diminution and ultimate negation of Chanu's in the South Asian diaspora in *Tower Hamlets*“.⁷¹

Brick Lane contains feminist features and the novel is also considered to be written in the tradition of Bildungsroman. It follows the evolution of the protagonist Nazneen who undergoes a significant transformation from a submissive and obedient woman to an independent and rebellious one. This transformation is gradual and it is accompanied by the feelings of anxiety, confusion and sometimes even anger. Nazneen gains experience in a new environment and her small rebellions result in the final decision not to return to Bangladesh with her husband but to stay in London with her two daughters and manage on her own.

This evolution is in terms of individual development or *Bildung*, a development that is characterized as a change from being the passive object of historical forces to being in a position of control. This is exactly the trajectory we follow in the case of Nazneen. She arrives in England imprisoned by her quixotic husband and her Islamic fatalism. By disposing of Chanu, rather sensitively, and confronting Mrs. Islam, she overcomes her submissiveness and becomes the forger of her own identity.⁷²

The following part will be devoted to the profile of individual male and female characters in the novel including their evolution and the role they play in the story. As for the main female protagonists, I have chosen Nazneen, her close friend Razia and Nazneen's sister Hasina about whom we learn exclusively from the letters she exchanges with Nazneen. I will also briefly characterize a minor female character Mrs. Islam who appears in a number of significant scenes though. Concerning the major male protagonists I will focus on Nazneen's husband Chanu and her young lover Karim. A few words will be devoted to Chanu's friend and a careful observer of the *Tower Hamlets*' Bangladeshi community, Dr. Azad. I will also briefly mention the second generation immigrants, namely Nazneen's daughters Bibi and Shahana and Razia's children Shefali and Tariq.

⁷¹ Sumita Roy, 1397.

⁷² Alistair Cormack, "Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form: Realism and the Postcolonial Subject in *Brick Lane*," *Contemporary Literature* 47 (Winter, 2006): 712, accessed January 6, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4489184>.

3.2 THE MAIN FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *BRICK LANE*

NAZNEEN

The novel starts with the story how Nazneen was born and how she was left to her fate when her mother refused to take her to the hospital because she believed that one must not fight against the fate. As a child Nazneen often hears this story and in her adulthood she tells it to her daughters.

As Nazneen grew she heard many times this story of How You Were Left To Your Fate. It was because of her mother's wise decision that Nazneen lived to become the wide-faced, watchful girl that she was. Fighting against one's Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, or perhaps most times, it can be fatal. Not once did Nazneen question the logic of the story of How You Were Left To Your Fate.⁷³

When she is eighteen, she is married to a forty-year old Bangladeshi immigrant in London and she must leave her village, her family and the memories of home soothe her when she stays confined to her flat in London's Tower Hamlets. She comes to London as a submissive, obedient and hard-working wife. She does not even think of protesting against her arranged marriage, unlike her sister Hasina who elopes with her lover at the age of sixteen. Nazneen's new life in London is very challenging, she is a village girl who suddenly appears in a foreign country with whose culture and language she is completely unfamiliar, she is supposed to live with a man she does not know at all, however, she accepts her fate as it is. For some time she stays in their flat and she does not even go out, therefore she feels like a prisoner.

In all her eighteen years, she could scarcely remember a moment that she had spent alone. Until she married. And came to London to sit day after day in this large box with the furniture to dust, and the muffled sound of private lives sealed away above, below and around her.⁷⁴

What further contributes to her disappointment is the fact that she finds out her husband Chanu sees her only as a hired girl, that he has no feelings for her. "Chanu does not see her as

⁷³ Ali, 15.

⁷⁴ Ali, 24.

a life partner but as a hired girl. There is no love, emotional relation or satisfactory communication between them⁷⁵. As time passes Nazneen starts to associate with other women from the local Bangladeshi community, she makes friends with Razia who shares a lot of her experience with Nazneen. Nazneen gradually becomes dissatisfied with her life of imprisonment, she tells Chanu that she would like to learn English but she meets only with indifference. She often reminisces of her happy childhood, her home village and of her sister Hasina with whom she exchanges letters. One day she leaves their flat and goes out alone, however, she gets lost and we learn that she did it because her sister was also lost in a big city. “That was the point of being lost. She, like Hasina, could not simply go home. They were both lost in cities that would not pause even to shrug. Poor Hasina⁷⁶. When Nazneen’s little son Raquib falls ill, she does not hesitate to take him to the hospital. For the first time she is angry with her mother that she did nothing to save her when she was a baby. “At once she was enraged. A mother who did nothing to save her own child! If Nazneen (her husband’s part she did not consider) had not brought the baby to hospital at once, he would have died⁷⁷. Unfortunately, not even in the hospital are they able to save Raquib. Later, Nazneen has two daughters, Bibi and Shahana who I would like to describe briefly at this point since they play an important role in their mother’s process of coming to independence and in her final decision to stay in London with them.

Bibi and Shahana were both born in Britain, educated in British schools, therefore they naturally feel more at home in Britain than in Bangladesh and they firmly refuse their father’s plans to return back home. Although Bibi is obedient to her father and she does her best not to enrage him, Shahana is a rebel and she keeps provoking her father.

Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans. She hated her kameez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them. [...] When Bangladesh was mentioned she pulled a face. She did not know and would not learn that Tagore was more than a poet and Nobel laureate, and no less than the true father of her nation. Shahana did not care. Shahana did not want to go back home.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Seda Arikian and F. Gul Kocsoy, 499.

⁷⁶ Ali, 59.

⁷⁷ Ali, 135.

⁷⁸ Ali, 180.

Shahana even shortly runs away from home to escape their departure, however, Nazneen manages to find her and Shahana learns that they will not go back with Chanu.

Nazneen even begins a series of small rebellions aimed at Chanu when she realizes that he will never be able to make his plans real, however, these rebellions go unnoticed by Chanu at first.

Nazneen dropped the promotion from her prayers. The next day she chopped two fiery red chillies 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.⁷⁹

Nazneen learns some English because she needs it in order to understand her daughters for whom English is the primary means of communication. When Chanu leaves his job and becomes unemployed, they need money to save for their journey home, therefore Nazneen starts working at home, she sews buttons and zips on the clothes that the young Bangladeshi middleman Karim brings. Their encounter represents a decisive moment in Nazneen's life because she falls in love and begins an extramarital affair with him. Karim strongly attracts Nazneen, he brings her physical satisfaction and thanks to him she slowly realizes what she really wants in life. "His certainty, dress, and language are signs that he belongs in the Western world – a characteristic to which Nazneen feels strongly attracted".⁸⁰ She has an impression that Karim takes her seriously unlike her husband, he makes her feel that what she says matters and he even makes her involved in his Muslim group Bengal Tigers. However, she suffers from constant remorse because they commit an unpardonable sin according to Muslim principles and she becomes torn between her religion and desire which brings about her nervous breakdown.

As a result of that relation, Nazneen has had a dilemma between her traditional self/religious belief and her freewill; on the one hand she wants to hold on her traditional and religious values, but on the other hand she cannot escape from her own

⁷⁹ Ali, 63.

⁸⁰ Alistair Cormack, 704.

desire and she enters into a difficult process in which gradually she will learn to fight against her faith.⁸¹

When she recovers from the nervous breakdown, she decides that from now on she will be the one to make her decisions. “Suddenly her entire being lit up with anger. *I will decide what to do. I will say what happens to me. I will be the one*“.⁸² Nazneen realizes that seemingly ordinary things may change her entire life. She wishes to be like the British women, wear the same clothes, behave in a confident way and become a part of the British society. Nazneen’s desire for change evokes the idea of progress.

Suddenly she was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well. If she wore a skirt and a jacket and a pair of high heels then what else would she do but walk around the glass palace on Bishopsgate, and talk to a slim phone and eat lunch out of a paper bag? If she wore trousers and underwear, like the girl with the big camera on Brick Lane, then she would roam the street fearless and proud.⁸³

As she becomes more and more independent, she finds out that she has got used to the British way of life and she does not want to play the role of a submissive wife who does not have the right to make her own decisions and she does not want to take her daughters away and make them suffer. Consequently, she makes her final verdict which says that she will not return to Bangladesh with Chanu and she will not marry Karim either. She realizes that Karim also sees her as a Bengali wife and an idea of home like Chanu does and that they used to idealize each other. She decides to take care of herself and her daughters and be independent of any man. After Chanu’s departure, Nazneen finds a job in garment trade with the help of her friend Razia and she is ready to live her life to the full.

Nazneen joins Razia in a collective of women garment workers, running their own business and acquiring a new independence. This liberation, offered to them by the opportunities of life in England, is symbolised at the very end of the book, when Razia and Nazneen’s daughters arrange a surprise visit to an ice-skating rink, where Nazneen

⁸¹ Seda Arikian and F. Gul Kocsoy, 501.

⁸² Ali, 405.

⁸³ Ali, 277.

will have the chance to move like the couple she watched on television, seventeen years earlier.⁸⁴

HASINA

Hasina is Nazneen's younger sister whose story represents a counter-narrative to that of Nazneen. Hasina, who is exceptionally beautiful, elopes with her lover when she is sixteen, she marries for love and stays in Bangladesh until the end. On the contrary, Nazneen's marriage is arranged and at the age of eighteen she is forced to leave her home country to live in Britain's capital London. As we can see, the two sisters take completely different life paths. We learn about Hasina from the letters she exchanges with Nazneen, these letters are written in a particular language – we do not actually know if it is a kind of illiterate Bengali or unsuccessful attempts at English. There is no intervention of the narrator in these passages devoted to Hasina (her letters), therefore the interpretation is left upon the reader.

Hasina's story starts when she elopes with her lover and gets married. She obeys her desire rather than her faith. She decides to leave home in order to marry for love not to be chosen a husband like her sister. However, her marriage does not end happily, therefore she has to escape to Dhaka (Bangladeshi capital) and she finds a job in a garment factory. Her situation is far from being easy since in Bangladeshi society women are not supposed to work and if they do so, they tend to be mocked and various restrictions are imposed on them such as being veiled in the factory. Since her departure from Gouripur, we have an impression that Hasina keeps moving down the social ladder until she reaches the very bottom. Fortunately, owing to her strong will and faith in God she always gets another chance.

Hasina elopes in a love match soon after Nazneen's arranged marriage and departure to London and, after leaving her husband, her life [...] becomes a meandering succession of husbands and other men, low-paying jobs and dangerous living arrangements (including a landlord who regularly rapes her). Hasina eventually finds safe but increasingly unstable refuge as a servant in the home of a prominent couple in Dhaka, but continues to lament where her life has led her.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Peter Preston, 19.

⁸⁵ Alfred J. López, "Everybody Else Just Living Their Lives: 9/11, Race and the New Postglobal Literature," *Patterns of Prejudice* 42 (2008): 509, accessed January 6, 2012, doi: 10.1080/00313220802377446.

Thanks to her moral strength, Hasina manages to overcome all the obstacles life puts in her way and she appreciates any decent job she gets.

Working is like cure. Some find it curse I meaning Renu. But I do not. Sewing pass the day and I sit with friends. As atual fact it bring true friendship and true love. Love marriage maybe is better call something else than love. In real marriage it grow slow slow. Habit. Sit together. Give bit here take bit there. That is how it come at work.⁸⁶

It is obvious that work brings to Hasina a feeling of self-fulfilment and satisfaction. After being sacked from the garment factory for having an affair with one of the workers she even falls into prostitution. Eventually, she gets a job as a servant in a family from Dhaka which she appreciates and enjoys very much.

From Hasina's letters we also learn a lot about the political and social situation in Bangladesh. We realize that the reality does not correspond to Chanu's idealized visions because many things have changed since he left his home country. Among the negative aspects of Bangladesh are: political instability, corruption, child labour, domestic violence and natural disasters. "Hasina's Bangladesh is wracked by environmental degradation, violence (especially domestic violence), abusive labour practices for women and children, even child trafficking".⁸⁷

At the very end of the novel we learn from Chanu who returned to Bangladesh, that Hasina eloped again, this time with her employer's cook. While Chanu is unable to understand Hasina's behaviour, Nazneen actually supports her sister's decision.

By treating Hasina's decision as a legitimate attempt to manage possibility, Nazneen suggests that it may not be so backward to still believe in love. With few job prospects, little indication that education is available, and the ever-present possibility of falling back into the sex trade, who is to say that romancing the cook is an irrational choice?⁸⁸

Some critics tend to claim that Nazneen's story is the story of progress and success as opposed to that of failure and absence of progress in Hasina's case. Nevertheless, both

⁸⁶ Ali, 152.

⁸⁷ Alfred J. López, 526.

⁸⁸ John Marx, "Feminization of Globalization," *Cultural Critique* 63 (Spring, 2006): 22, accessed January 6, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4489245>.

Nazneen and Hasina evolve into independent women in control of their own lives. It might be argued that Hasina is an independent woman from the beginning while Nazneen's process of emancipation and liberation is gradual and it peaks at the moment when she refuses to return to Bangladesh with her husband. The truth is that Hasina does not have the same opportunities in Dhaka as Nazneen has in London. Therefore it remains a question if Hasina's story represents decline and failure or not. "Thus *Brick Lane* provides readers with grounds to disagree on whether the difference between the two sisters' stories represents a difference between advancement and failure".⁸⁹

RAZIA

Razia is another member of the Tower Hamlets' Bangladeshi community. She becomes the best friend of Nazneen's. Since she is more experienced, she helps Nazneen familiarize with the local community, its culture and customs. Razia also helps Nazneen overcome her initial loneliness, they pay regular visits to each other and she becomes a model of confidence and independence for Nazneen. Although Razia is not considered to be a respectable type by Nazneen's husband Chanu, she plays a crucial role in Nazneen's emancipation and she gives her a lot of useful advice on how to get along in the western society.

The novel suggests female friendship as a key to survival, and it is Nazneen's closeness to an unconventional and as such "undesirable" Bangladeshi woman, Razia, who insists on claiming ownership of Britishness, which helps her to gain more confidence in the world outside the home and economic independence.⁹⁰

Razia does her best to integrate into the British society, she owns a British passport, starts smoking, finds a job in a factory and she wears a tracksuit instead of sari. "She was wearing a garment she called a tracksuit. She would never, so she said, wear a sari again".⁹¹ Razia is the one who encourages Nazneen to learn English and start working. She does not care what other members of the Bangladeshi community think of her. Her husband does not give her much money because he sends most of it back to Bangladesh for building a mosque. However,

⁸⁹ John Marx, 22.

⁹⁰ Chris Weedon, 26.

⁹¹ Ali, 95.

Razia cannot put up with the fact that her two children Shefali and Tariq do not get everything they need and she finds her own job. She mocks the community's conventions about women working. " 'Will the community feed me? Will it buy footballs for my son? Let the community say what it will. I say *this* to the community.' "⁹² Razia also warns Nazneen before Mrs. Islam and she tells her that the old woman is a usurer while Nazneen's husband Chanu thinks she is a respectable type. " 'Listen, you will never be rid of this debt. Whatever you pay, she will say you owe interest and fees and this and that. I know of one case where they have been paying for six, seven years.' "⁹³ Razia actually plays the role of Nazneen's protector, always ready to support her.

However, Razia experiences a lot of painful moments in the course of the novel. Her husband dies in an accident at work, her son Tariq becomes a drug addict demanding money all the time and finally selling off furniture in all their flat. Nevertheless, Razia is such a strong person that she deals with all these problems and emerges as a clear winner. In the end, she even sets up her own clothing business and employs her friends including Nazneen. She admits that without Razia, she would be unable to make a living.

Without Razia there would be no money at all, because Karim had disappeared. She had no middleman, no contact for the factory, no work for her needle, no means to support the children. She prayed to God, but He had already given her what she needed: Razia.⁹⁴

I am convinced that Razia undoubtedly belongs among the novel's major protagonists, because she plays a decisive role in the process of Nazneen's integration and emancipation. Whenever she is in trouble, Razia is the person she can always rely on.

MRS. ISLAM

Mrs. Islam is an elderly Bangladeshi woman living in Tower Hamlets. She knows everybody in the community and she is generally considered to be a wise and respectable woman. Although she is a minor character in the novel, she appears in a number of episodes

⁹² Ali, 97.

⁹³ Ali, 314.

⁹⁴ Ali, 484.

and she plays an important role in the lives of Nazneen and Chanu, unfortunately a negative one.

Mrs Islam knew everything about everybody. She had been in London for nearly thirty years and if you were a Bangladeshi here, what could you keep secret from her? Mrs. Islam was the first person who called on Nazneen, in those first days when her head was still spinning and the days were all dreams and real life came to her only at night, when she slept.⁹⁵

The name of Mrs. Islam carries a symbolic meaning which stands for the religious faith of the majority of British Bangladeshis. Mrs. Islam also represents a rigid character since she tries to preserve the traditional Muslim values as well as her position in the community. She keeps a close contact with all the Bangladeshis from the community and as an elderly and wise woman she is supposed to give help and advice to those who are in trouble. However, she misuses the trust local Bangladeshis put in her and she becomes a usurer. “Mrs. Islam attempts to recreate village structures and to exert the same power as she might enjoy in Bangladesh, exploiting the vulnerability of Bangladeshi immigrants in her role as a moneylender”.⁹⁶ The reason why she associates with all the members of the community, especially the newcomers, is that she needs to know when they get into financial crisis, so that she can immediately offer them “help”. By keeping in close contact with them, paying regular visits to her Bangladeshi neighbours, she knows all their secrets which she can use anytime to make them pay what they owe. Sometimes, she even brings along her two sons in order to intimidate the defaulters. Nevertheless, she pretends to be a kind-hearted woman who gives money to those in need.

“Yes, I do all these things for my community, and I expect no thanks.” She raised her hand as if to ward off gratitude. “If someone is sick, they come to me. If someone’s husband runs off, they come to me. If a child needs a roof, they come to me. And I give. All the time, giving.”⁹⁷

Chanu also uses Mrs. Islam’s “aid” and lends money for a sewing machine and a computer. He does not tell Nazneen about his loan, but she soon finds out because Mrs. Islam comes and

⁹⁵ Ali, 28.

⁹⁶ Peter Preston, 16.

⁹⁷ Ali, 308.

asks for the money they owe. They need to save for their journey back home, however, Mrs. Islam demands more and more. When Nazneen claims to have nothing more to give her, Mrs. Islam wants the money for the tickets to spoil their plans. “ ‘No, child. Are you going to swim back home with your pots on your head? You have money for the plane ticket.’ ”⁹⁸

Mrs. Islam also attempts to awake sympathy by pretending to be seriously ill, her handbag is constantly filled with all possible medicaments. When these attempts fail, she comes with her two sons who threaten the person who owes with violence. During her final visit by Nazneen’s, she tries to make her pay by blackmailing that she will tell Chanu about her affair with Karim. Surprisingly, Nazneen claims that her husband knows everything and nothing can make her pay any more interest.

“We paid what we owed,” said Nazneen. Her voice clogged up her ears. “We paid at least three hundred on top of that. I’m not going to pay any more...” She hesitated. “Any more riba.” [...] “There are some things a wife does not want a husband to know.” Nazneen burnt. She did not look away. “Fresh start,” said Mrs. Islam. “New life, back home. You don’t want anything to spoil it.” “My husband,” said Nazneen slowly, “knows everything. He’ll come soon. Why don’t you ask him?”⁹⁹

Mrs. Islam feels offended by the accusation that she charges interest and she tries to deny it. However, Nazneen is not afraid of her and her sons anymore because she has learnt to stand up for herself and to free herself from the restrictions of the Bangladeshi community. Finally, Mrs. Islam leaves without money, defeated by a woman about whom she thought she would never dare to resist. Nazneen’s victory over villainous Mrs. Islam marks the progress in the community and the emancipation of local women.

To summarize, women generally represent morally strong characters in the novel. They manage to integrate well into the British society (except Hasina who stays in Bangladesh) and they are able to make their living which means they become independent of men. Nazneen and Razia stand for emancipation, integration and progress. Although they have to overcome a series of problems in the beginning, they finally achieve success. Nazneen undergoes a major transformation from a submissive housewife to an independent woman. Razia, who plays the role of Nazneen’s advisor and protector, even sets up a clothing business in the end. Hasina is a controversial character since it is not clear if she represents a success or

⁹⁸ Ali, 306.

⁹⁹ Ali, 444-445.

a failure. Nevertheless, she also makes her own decisions and she follows her desire rather than the social conventions. Mrs. Islam is a symbol of Muslim traditions and established social hierarchy. Although she pretends to be generous and kind-hearted, she is actually a cold-blooded usurer.

3.3 THE MAIN MALE CHARACTERS IN *BRICK LANE*

CHANU

Chanu is a forty-year old Bangladeshi immigrant who has lived in London nearly half his life and who is joined by his wife Nazneen after their arranged marriage. He tends to perceive Nazneen only as a servant and an unspoilt girl from the village.

“I would not say so. Not beautiful, but not so ugly either. The face is broad, big forehead. Eyes are a bit too close together.“ [...] “What’s more, she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that. The only complaint I could make is she can’t put my files in order, because she has no English. I don’t complain though. As I say, a girl from the village: totally unspoilt.“¹⁰⁰

He belongs among the educated Bangladeshi immigrants and he is very proud of his degree from Dhaka University. He claims how lucky Nazneen is that she married such an educated and westernized man, however, he does not really treat her in a western way. Moreover, he shows the oppressive attitude towards his wife, he does not allow her to learn English, to go out alone or to associate with other people from the community. When he is talking to her, she seems to be only a part of a larger audience, she is not supposed to join in the conversation. In the beginning, Chanu is very hard-working and ambitious and he longs for success and promotion in his job. He keeps reading and educating himself in his spare time. He says that he made two promises when he came to Britain. “ ‘I will be a success, come what may. That’s promise number one. Number two, I will go back home. When I am a success. And I will honour these promises.’ “¹⁰¹ Chanu looks down on his fellow

¹⁰⁰ Ali, 22-23.

¹⁰¹ Ali, 34-35.

Bangladeshis who came to Britain from the Sylhet region and who belong to the working-class.

“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. [...] If a man has only ever driven a rickshaw and never in his life held a book in his hand, then what can you expect from him?”¹⁰²

Chanu enjoys talking about the history and culture of his home country, reciting his favourite Bengali poet Tagore, he always finds audience in his wife and his two daughters. When he realizes that he will never be promoted, he resigns, finds a job as a taxi driver and from then on he decides to talk less and act more. He gradually loses his illusions about his career in Britain and creates an idealized vision of Bangladesh where he wants to return with all his family as soon as he earns enough money for the journey. He slowly becomes fed up with the British culture and society. “ ‘Because our culture is so strong. And what is their culture? Television, pub, throwing darts, kicking a ball. That is the white working-class culture.’ ”¹⁰³ He starts to realize that he has not made it, he failed and all his dreams are falling apart. He feels that he cannot stay in London anymore and he wants to take his family with him in order to save them from the negative effects of the British society but also of the Tower Hamlets’ Bangladeshi community.

“Sometimes I look back and I am shocked. Every day of my life I have prepared for success, worked for it, waited for it, and you don’t notice how the days pass until nearly a lifetime has finished. Then it hits you – the thing you have been waiting for has already gone by. And it was going in the other direction. It’s like I’ve been waiting on the wrong side of the road for a bus that was already full. [...] You see, the things I had to fight: racism, ignorance, poverty, all of that – I don’t want you to go through it.”¹⁰⁴

At this point it is evident that Chanu represents an immigrant who is torn between two cultures and who fails to make his dreams and ambitions real. In the end, he must leave on his

¹⁰² Ali, 28.

¹⁰³ Ali, 254.

¹⁰⁴ Ali, 320.

own, without his family because he cannot simply continue to live in a society where he has not made it.

“You’re coming with me, then? You’ll come?” “No,” she breathed. She lifted his head and looked into his face. It was dented and swollen, almost out of recognition. “I can’t go with you,” she said. “I can’t stay,” said Chanu, and they clung to each other inside a sadness that went beyond words and tears, beyond that place, those causes and consequences, and became a part of their breath, their marrow, to travel with them from now on to wherever they went.¹⁰⁵

KARIM

Karim is a young second generation Bangladeshi immigrant in London who has never been to Bangladesh before, he can speak both Bengali and English though. He enters Nazneen’s life as a middleman bringing her batches of garment to work on at home. Nevertheless, he plays a much more significant role in her life since he becomes Nazneen’s lover and he makes her realize what she wants from life. Therefore, he speeds up her process of emancipation and coming to independence.

What Nazneen finds attractive on Karim is that he is self-confident, masculine, he dresses in a British way, he simply seems to fit his surroundings. Moreover, he has a place in the world which neither Nazneen with Chanu nor Hasina ever find.

She thought about his certainty, how he walked a straight line while others turned and stumbled. And 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.¹⁰⁶

Karim brings a new sense to Nazneen’s life, he brings her physical satisfaction but also a feeling that what she says is important for him unlike Chanu who never really listens to her. “This was something he did: made her feel as if she had said a weighty piece, as if she had stated a new truth”.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ali, 478.

¹⁰⁶ Ali, 264.

¹⁰⁷ Ali, 262.

It was as if the conflagration of her bouts with Karim had cast a special light on everything, a dawn light after a life lived in twilight. It was as if she had been born deficient and only now been gifted the missing sense.¹⁰⁸

Karim even makes Nazneen involved in his activist group Bengal Tigers whose aim is to protect and promote Muslim rights and culture not only in London but all around the world. He becomes the leader of this group and arranges regular meetings. However, since his group's ambitions are not met, he becomes more radical in his opinions but at the same time less confident. He feels he has not fulfilled his purpose in Britain and therefore has lost his place in the British society. Nazneen notices that he has taken over the role of her husband since he talks more than he acts. "While her husband talked less and less, Karim talked more and more. The more he talked, the less sure he seemed".¹⁰⁹

When Nazneen decides not to leave with Chanu but to stay in London, nothing actually obstructs her to marry Karim. However, she realizes that Karim sees her as "the real thing", "a Bengali wife", and "an idea of home". As a result, she decides to turn down his proposal for marriage because the way he sees her does not correspond to her self-image. She does not want to be the real thing and the unspoilt girl from the village anymore. "How did Karim see her? The real thing, he said. She was his real thing. A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her".¹¹⁰ When Nazneen meets Karim to tell him she does not go to Bangladesh but she does not want to marry him either, she notices that he has changed his appearance and is wearing Bangladeshi clothes now. She also realizes that Karim has not made it like Chanu and what he feels is bitter disappointment, therefore she feels pity for him.

She had seen what she wanted to see. She had looked at him and seen only his possibilities. Now she looked again and saw that the disappointments of his life, which would shape him, had yet to happen. It gave her pain. She almost changed her mind.¹¹¹

Nazneen finds out that they actually made each other up and saw only the positive things on one another. " 'How can I explain? I wasn't me, and you weren't you. From the very

¹⁰⁸ Ali, 301.

¹⁰⁹ Ali, 407.

¹¹⁰ Ali, 454.

¹¹¹ Ali, 449.

beginning to the very end, we didn't see things. What we did – we made each other up. ‘ ‘¹¹²
After Chanu's departure, Nazneen learns that Karim has gone to Bangladesh. This new information evokes in her the following vision of Karim. “Nazneen had a vision: Karim in his jeans and white shirt, a thin gold chain at his neck and a bale of dresses over his shoulder. Karim in a mountain cave, surrounded by men in turbans wielding machine-guns“¹¹³.

DR. AZAD

Dr. Azad is a minor male character in *Brick Lane*, however, he plays an important role in the life of Nazneen and Chanu because he provides them with medical service, keeps an eye on Chanu's ulcer and pays regular visits to their flat. He is also concerned with the issues of the Tower Hamlets' Bangladeshi community, namely unemployment, alcoholism, street gangs, or drug addiction. He often comes to Chanu in order to discuss these various problems Bangladeshi immigrants living in Britain have to face. More importantly, he enables Chanu to return to Bangladesh by lending him money for the plane ticket.

Dr. Azad discovers a kind of “disease“ Bangladeshi immigrants in Tower Hamlets often suffer from – so called “Going Home Syndrome“ which basically means that the immigrants never really leave home and they do what they can to return back, however, they do not ever save enough for the journey. Dr. Azad explains that he also wanted to go back but every time something would happen and now he does not know anymore whether to leave or stay. Nazneen and Chanu wonder why Dr. Azad never invites them into his own house, so one day they decide to take him by surprise. As soon as they enter his house and meet his wife, they seem to understand why he seeks every opportunity to escape from his home. It is Dr. Azad's westernized wife who dominates the household and who is far from being an obedient and submissive Bangladeshi wife. In contrast, it seems that it is her husband who is the one under control. It is evident that their marriage does not work properly.

And she knew why the doctor came. Not for the food, not to get away from this purple-clawed woman (although maybe for these things as well), not to share a love of learning, not to borrow books or discuss mobile libraries or literature or politics or art.

¹¹² Ali, 454-455.

¹¹³ Ali, 486.

He came as a man of science, to observe a rare specimen: unhappiness greater than his own.¹¹⁴

Together with Chanu and Karim, Dr. Azad is another example of a Bangladeshi man who experiences disappointment and failure in Britain. Although he is successful as a doctor, he fails in his private life. The British society and way of life make him alienated from his wife because she becomes independent and successful and she does not need him anymore.

“It was a “love“ marriage, you see. [...] What I did not know – I was a young man – is that there are two kinds of love. The kind that starts off big and slowly wears away, that seems you can never use it up and then one day is finished. And the kind that you don’t notice at first, but which adds a little bit to itself every day, like an oyster makes a pearl, grain by grain, a jewel from the sand.”¹¹⁵

When Dr. Azad lends them money for their journey back home, Nazneen wonders why he did it. She suggests that he might want to save their marriage when his own failed and that he wants to provide a cure for the “Going Home Syndrome“ or he simply wants to get rid of Chanu. When she asks him, he says that he gave Chanu the money because he is a very good friend of his. It is true that Dr. Azad might have felt better by Chanu and Nazneen than at home where he is no more respected and admired.

Why did he lend the money? Was it a cure? For that special Tower Hamlets disease that he had discovered and named and which would never get into the medical books. What had he called it? Going Home Syndrome. Did he, with his own marriage broken, want to save another marriage where he could? Did he simply want to get rid of Chanu? Get rid of this ridiculous man who claimed him for a kindred spirit?¹¹⁶

Although Dr. Azad’s story does not occupy the same amount of space in the novel as the stories of other major characters, he plays a very specific role there, he is present in a large number of scenes and what is more, he is another representative of a male failure besides

¹¹⁴ Ali, 114-115.

¹¹⁵ Ali, 429-430.

¹¹⁶ Ali, 456.

Chanu and Karim. He advises as well as cures his fellow Bangladeshis, he is unable to save his own marriage though and he loses his place in the British society.

To summarize, the novel challenges gender role expectations of the Tower Hamlets' Bangladeshi community since it is no more valid that men are dominant and women are absolutely dependent on them. In *Brick Lane*, female characters are those who emancipate and become independent while male characters fail in the British society and they end up defeated and disillusioned. In particular, the female protagonists Nazneen and Razia are submissive and self-conscious in the beginning, however, after their emancipation and integration they become independent and self-confident. In the end, they are able to manage on their own in London and they represent morally strong characters. On the contrary, the male protagonists Chanu and Karim are self-confident and ambitious in the beginning, however, as their dreams fail one by one they become disillusioned and frustrated. Unable to stay in London (and in Britain) anymore they return to Bangladesh, lonely and defeated. Therefore, they represent morally weak characters in the novel.

CONCLUSION

My thesis was primarily based on Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* which deals with the experience of Bangladeshi immigrants in the East End of London. Ali undoubtedly belongs among the British ethnic authors due to her ethnic background (she is a second generation immigrant of mixed origin) but mainly due to the themes she explores in her novels. In *Brick Lane* she primarily focuses on a number of first generation Bangladeshi immigrants in London. She is concerned with the feelings of displacement and alienation they experience in the new country, she also examines the process of their integration into the local community but also into the British society as well as the problems they have to face including discrimination, racism, unemployment, criminality, etc. Ali's novel shows us what it is like to be an immigrant (a Bangladeshi immigrant in particular) in Britain's capital. The two main sources of information for her novel were the research in East London's Bangladeshi community and the storytelling of her father who comes from Bangladesh.

The aim of the first chapter was to introduce the context of post-war British ethnic literature which includes the authors as well as the themes they deal with in their works. Since most of the ethnic authors are either first or second generation immigrants from the former British colonies, they are often referred to as Black British writers. The most prominent theme of their writing is the immigrant experience in general for which reason the works are known under the term "immigrant fiction". To be able to understand the emergence of these authors and their subject matter, I have provided a brief account of the historical background of Britain in the post-Second World War period. I have concluded the first chapter with a short biography of Monica Ali including some basic information about her novel *Brick Lane* which also belongs to the immigrant fiction.

Chapter two opens with a brief overview of the waves of immigration to the UK which helps to explain the diversity of British ethnic composition. Since the end of the Second World War Britain experienced massive immigration from its former colonies, especially the Indian subcontinent. London has traditionally acted as a magnet for immigrants, therefore I have also presented its most numerous ethnic minorities. The next part of this chapter was devoted to a brief description of London's East End both from the historical perspective and from the today's point of view. London's East End has been dominated by the Bangladeshi immigrants since the 1970s, therefore I have concluded the second chapter with a detailed profile of the British Bangladeshis commenting on various aspects of their lives. This final

part was meant to present the Bangladeshi community in general to be able to understand the stories of the main protagonists of *Brick Lane* who are dealt with in the last chapter.

The third chapter is entirely based on the novel *Brick Lane* because it deals with its main female and male protagonists. At the beginning of this chapter I have discussed the role of gender in the novel because the Bangladeshi Muslims follow prescribed gender expectations and their gender roles are strictly divided. Men are dominant in their culture, they make a living for the family while women stay at home and take care of children and they are not supposed to get involved in employment or education. By analyzing the main female and male protagonists I have found out that the traditional gender roles of the Bangladeshi culture are challenged in the novel and Bangladeshi women undergo a major transformation from submissiveness and total obedience to independence and self-reliance. Unlike the male characters, their female counterparts represent progress and success in the British society and they do not feel the urge to return to Bangladesh anymore. Therefore it can be claimed that *Brick Lane* is a feminised text since one of its key themes is the emancipation of the main protagonist Nazneen (which represents the emancipation of women in general) in the man-dominated Bangladeshi community.

4. SHRnutí

Ve své bakalářské práci jsem vycházela z románu *Brick Lane* spisovatelky Monicy Ali. Děj tohoto románu se odehrává v centru londýnské bangladéšské komunity. Autorka nás seznamuje s životem a kulturou bangladéšských přistěhovalců a s jejich integrací do britské společnosti. Výběrem tématu i postav se proto Monica Ali řadí mezi autory britské poválečné etnické literatury.

4.1 KONTEXT POVÁLEČNÉ BRITSKÉ ETNICKÉ LITERATURY

V úvodu první kapitoly jsem stručně nastínila historický vývoj Velké Británie po 2. světové válce, jelikož významně ovlivnil témata zpracovaná autory etnické literatury. Po 2. světové válce došlo k oslabení a následnému rozpadu Britského impéria. To postupně ztratilo své kolonie v důsledku vzrůstajícího nacionalismu a následné nezávislosti kolonií. Začal tak proces masivní imigrace do Velké Británie, který vedl k její velké kulturní proměně, která byla britskými obyvateli vnímána převážně negativně. V roce 1947 získaly nezávislost dva jihoasijské státy – Indie a Pákistán, které se rozdělily na základě odlišného náboženství. V roce 1971 vznikl samostatný stát Bangladéš (dříve Východní Pákistán). Bangladéš však musel čelit řadě problémů jako například: přírodní katastrofy, vysoká míra nezaměstnanosti, chudoba, politická nestabilita, atd. Proto se mnoho obyvatel rozhodlo imigrovat do Británie, kam mířili za prací a lepší životní úrovní.

Témata v dílech britských etnických autorů odrážejí poválečný vývoj ve Velké Británii a jejich bývalých koloniích. Obecně se autoři zabývají imigrací do Británie, postavením přistěhovalců, jejich začleněním do britské společnosti a problémy, které musí řešit. Autoři sami jsou často přistěhovalci první nebo druhé generace, proto mohou čerpat z vlastní zkušenosti. Popisují například pocity, které prožívají přistěhovalci v nové zemi, mezi něž nejčastěji patří kulturní šok, odcizení, osamění, zklamání, hledání nové identity či pocity méněcennosti v britské většinové společnosti. V dílech etnických autorů se často hovoří o problémech, se kterými se setkávají přistěhovalci, a to konkrétně o rasismu, diskriminaci (ve vzdělávání, zaměstnání, bydlení) a o jazykové bariéře (zejména v případě přistěhovalců první generace). Nejběžnějším žánrem poválečné etnické literatury je vývojový román, který sleduje proměnu hlavního hrdiny v čase. Tento typ literatury také přinesl řadu tematických a jazykových inovací.

Tvorba britských etnických autorů je stejně různorodá jako samotný jejich etnický původ. Jedná se totiž většinou o přistěhovalce první nebo druhé generace z bývalých britských kolonií. Autoři se obecně zabývají otázkou imigrace a zkušeností přistěhovalců; jejich zaměření se však nepatrně liší podle toho, zda patří k imigrantům první nebo druhé generace. Jako představitele etnické literatury jsem zvolila tyto autory: H. Kureishi, K. Ishiguro, T. Mo, B. Okri, C. Phillips, S. Rushdie, A. Levy, M. Syal a Z. Smith.

V závěru první kapitoly jsem věnovala zvláštní pozornost Monice Ali a jejímu románu *Brick Lane*. Monica Ali patří k přistěhovalcům druhé generace, narodila se v Bangladéši, její matka byla Angličanka, její otec Bangladéšan. V době nepokojů v 70. letech se celá rodina přestěhovala do Londýna, kde Monica Ali žije dodnes. V roce 2003 vyšel její román *Brick Lane*, který sklídl příznivý ohlas čtenářů i kritiky. Někteří členové londýnské bangladéšské komunity však Monice Ali vytýkali nedostatek osobní zkušenosti (když jí byly tři roky, přestěhovala se její rodina do Londýna; přímo ve východní části Londýna navíc nikdy nežila), kvůli čemuž je podle nich její popis bangladéšské komunity neobjektivní.

Hlavní hrdinkou románu *Brick Lane* je mladá dívka z Bangladéše Nazneen, kterou otec provdá za daleko staršího bangladéšského přistěhovalce žijícího v Londýně – Chanua. Nazneen je proto nucena přestěhovat se za ním. Vzorně se stará o domácnost i rodinu (manžela a dvě dcery) podle muslimských zásad a tradic; zřídka kdy opouští jejich byt. Postupně se začleňuje do tamní bangladéšské komunity i do britské společnosti. Chanu touží po návratu do Bangladéše, protože britskou společnost i kulturu považuje za rasistickou a zkaženou. Zatímco jeho sny se rozplývají, Nazneen se postupně stává silnou a nezávislou ženou, která překonává předsudky své komunity a nebojí se otevřeně vyjádřit svůj názor. Dokonce naváže milostný vztah s mladým Bangladéšanem Karimem, díky němuž si uvědomí, co chce v životě dokázat. Proto se nakonec rozhodne zůstat s dcerami v Británii a živit rodinu sama.

4.2 HISTORIE LONDÝNSKÉ ČTVRTI BRICK LANE

Ve druhé kapitole jsem stručně popsala jednotlivé vlny přistěhovalců do Velké Británie, což pomáhá vysvětlit multikulturní charakter současné Británie (včetně hlavního města Londýna). V 17. století se Británie stala cílem francouzských protestantů, kteří prchali před katolickými pronásledovateli. O století později sem dorazili Irové a černí otroci z Karibiku. Židovští přistěhovalci přišli ve dvou hlavních vlnách – v 19. století z východní

Evropy a ve 30. letech 20. století z nacistického Německa. Imigrace z jižní Asie (Indie, Pakistán, Bangladéš) byla otázkou 2. poloviny 20. století. V důsledku masové imigrace (zejména po 2. světové válce) byla Británie nucena přijmout legislativní opatření omezující příliv přistěhovalců.

Hlavní důvody pro imigraci do Británie byly ekonomické, politické a rodinné. Přistěhovalci sem mířili nejčastěji za prací a lepší životní úrovní. Výjimkou nebyli ani političtí uprchlíci, kteří byli ve své zemi pronásledováni režimem. Tito přistěhovalci byli později následováni svými rodinami a dětmi, usadili se a vytvořili v Británii trvalé a početné komunity. Po svém příjezdu do Británie musí přistěhovalci často čelit diskriminaci a rasovým útokům. Přistěhovalci druhé generace navíc prožívají krizi identity, jelikož se narodili a vyrůstali v Británii, ale cítí, že do britské společnosti stále zcela nepatří zejména kvůli své odlišné kultuře. Zároveň však postrádají silnou vazbu na rodnou zemi svých rodičů. Proto si v britské společnosti stále připadají jako cizinci, což v nich může vyvolávat pocity frustrace a odcizení.

Londýn tradičně působil na přistěhovalce jako magnet. Vlivem imigrace (zejména po roce 1945) se stal britským multikulturním centrem. Co se týká etnického složení londýnské populace, mezi nejpočetnější skupiny patří Židé, Indové, Pakistánci, Bangladéšané a přistěhovalci z východní Evropy (zejména Poláci). Židé proudili do Británie ve dvou vlnách – a to na konci 19. století a v období mezi dvěma světovými válkami. Ve většině případů šlo o politické uprchlíky. Usadili se převážně ve východní části Londýna a pracovali hlavně v textilním průmyslu. Židům se podařilo velmi rychle integrovat do britské společnosti, a proto se začali stěhovat pryč z chudých čtvrtí, ve kterých je vystřídali především Bangladéšané. Imigrace z jižní Asie proběhla po 2. světové válce, kdy tyto bývalé britské kolonie získaly nezávislost. Integrace těchto přistěhovalců byla ztížena kulturními a náboženskými rozdíly mezi Británií a jejich rodnou zemí. Bangladéšské komunitě jsem se podrobně věnovala na konci druhé kapitoly. Po 2. světové válce do Británie proudili imigranti ze střední a východní Evropy, z nichž nejpočetnější skupinu představují Poláci, kteří se usadili v západní části Londýna. Příliv imigrantů ze střední a východní Evropy pokračuje i ve 21. století. Po vstupu do Evropské Unie totiž získali občané členských států příležitost pracovat v Británii, kterou se velké množství z nich rozhodlo využít.

Dále jsem stručně charakterizovala londýnskou čtvrť Brick Lane, ve které se odehrává děj stejnojmenného románu. V této čtvrti tradičně přebývají přistěhovalci, kteří se ještě nestačili trvale usadit. V současné době dominuje této čtvrti bangladéšská komunita, která sem přinesla svou kulturu, kuchyni i svůj životní styl. Tato londýnská čtvrť je také spojena

s řadou negativních aspektů jako jsou: kriminalita, chudoba, drogová závislost, vysoká nezaměstnanost či stísněné bytové podmínky.

V poslední části druhé kapitoly jsem se zaměřila na londýnskou bangladéšskou komunitu, abychom mohli lépe sledovat osudy protagonistů *Brick Lane* v závěrečné kapitole. Přistěhovalci z Bangladéše přicházeli do Británie již od konce 19. století, hlavní vlna imigrace proběhla v letech 1950 a 1960 kvůli nepříznivé ekonomické situaci ve Východním Pakistánu. Další vlna následovala v letech 1970, a to po vzniku samostatného Bangladéše. Tito přistěhovalci se usadili v Londýně, zejména ve čtvrti Brick Lane. Míra nezaměstnanosti v bangladéšské komunitě je nejvyšší ze všech etnických menšin v Londýně. V zaměstnání se setkávají s diskriminací, musí přijmout práci, která zdaleka neodpovídá jejich vzdělání. Bangladéšské ženy podle jejich kulturní a náboženské tradice nepracují, protože jejich úkolem je péče o domácnost a výchova dětí. Zajímavé je srovnání první a druhé generace přistěhovalců. Jejich názory se liší jednak ve vztahu k Bangladéši, jednak v tradičním rozdělení ženských a mužských rolí. Zatímco Bangladéšani první generace chovají silné citové pouto ke své rodné zemi, pro jejich potomky je rodná země Británie, jejíž kultura je jim čím dál bližší než kultura jejich rodičů. Z tohoto důvodu mezi oběma generacemi často dochází k názorovým střetům. Dále jsem se věnovala postavení ženy v bangladéšské komunitě. Na základě jejich náboženského vyznání (islám) stojí v čele společnosti muž, jehož úkolem je finančně zabezpečit rodinu a rozhodovat o chodu domácnosti. Jejich ženy zůstávají „uvězněny“ ve svých bytech, starají se o domácnost a nemají téměř příležitost začlenit se do vlastní komunity ani do britské společnosti. Velkou překážkou v jejich integraci představuje také neznalost anglického jazyka. Postavení bangladéšských žen hraje důležitou roli v románu *Brick Lane*, jelikož hlavní hrdinkou je Bangladéšanka Nazneen, které se podaří vymanit z nadvlády manžela a z kulturních tradic její komunity, a dokáže prosadit svůj vlastní názor. Co se týká mladých Bangladéšanů, ti se nejčastěji potýkají s problémy kriminality, alkoholismu, drogové závislosti a pouličních gangů. Tyto negativní vlivy pramení především z diskriminace, vysoké nezaměstnanosti a neúspěšné integrace do britské společnosti. Bangladéšští muslimové si stěžují na zaujatost médií, která je prezentují jako problematickou a nepřizpůsobivou etnickou menšinu, zatímco přehlížejí většinu z nich, kteří žijí poklidným a spořádaným životem. Tyto neshody jsou pravděpodobně způsobeny britskou netolerancí bangladéšské kultury a jejich náboženství, ale i bangladéšským nepochopením kultury britské. Na výše zmíněné aspekty života londýnských Bangladéšanů odkazuje i poslední kapitola věnovaná hlavním ženským a mužským postavám románu.

4.3 HLAVNÍ ŽENSKÉ A MUŽSKÉ POSTAVY V ROMÁNU *BRICK LANE*

Ve třetí, a zároveň závěrečné, kapitole jsem se věnovala hlavním ženským a mužským postavám v románu *Brick Lane*. Všechny románové postavy jsou bangladéští přistěhovalci (1. generace, s výjimkou jejich potomků) žijící ve východní části Londýna.

V úvodní části kapitoly jsem se pokusila objasnit, jakou roli hraje pohlaví v tradiční muslimské bangladéšské komunitě. I přesto, že islám je náboženstvím, ve kterém vládne muž a kde jsou přísně rozděleny mužské a ženské role, v románu *Brick Lane* se ženským postavám podaří tyto konvence překonat. Román obsahuje četné feministické prvky, jedním z nejvýznamnějších je emancipace hlavní hrdinky Nazneen. Té se postupně podaří oprostít od konvencí bangladéšské komunity a stane se z ní samostatná žena, nezávislá na manželovi. Ženské postavy jsou prezentovány jako silné osobnosti na rozdíl od mužských postav, kterým se nepodaří začlenit do britské společnosti a prosadit se v ní. Z tohoto důvodu se vracejí do Bangladéše, poražení a zklamaní. *Brick Lane* můžeme zařadit do žánru vývojového románu, jelikož sleduje proměnu Nazneen v čase ve zralou a zkušenou ženu. V další části kapitoly jsem podrobně charakterizovala jednotlivé mužské a ženské postavy, s přihlédnutím k jejich funkci v románu.

Nazneen je ústřední postavou románu, z jejíhož pohledu jsou popisovány všechny události i další postavy. Děj románu začíná narozením Nazneen a vyprávěním, jak byla ponechána svému osudu. Zásadou nikdy nezasahovat do osudu se Nazneen řídí většinu svého života. Když je v osmnácti letech provdána za čtyřicetiletého Bangladéšana žijícího v londýnské čtvrti Brick Lane, ani ji nenapadne protestovat. Náhle se však ocitá v cizí zemi, po boku cizího muže. Velmi rychle se však adaptuje, vzorně se stará o domácnost, nicméně jí chybí rodná vesnice, sestra Hasina, ale také kontakt s lidmi obecně. Postupně se seznamuje s dalšími ženami ze své komunity, zejména s Raziou, která se stane její opravdovou přítelkyní. Nazneen začne stereotypní způsob života vadit, a tak se rozhodne ho změnit. Navzdory muslimským tradicím dokonce naváže milostný vztah s mladým Bangladéšanem Karimem, který Nazneen poskytne vše, co u svého manžela postrádá. Nazneen však trpí výčitkami svědomí, že podvádí svého muže, což způsobí její nervové zhroucení. Po svém zotavení se rozhodne vzít svůj život do vlastních rukou. Uvědomí si, že už nechce být poslušnou a závislou manželkou, ale touží po britském způsobu života, který by ji v ničem neomezoval. Oznámí Chanuovi, že i s dcerami zůstane v Londýně, odmítne i Karimovu

žádost o ruku. Dojde jí, že oba v ní viděli pouze ideál bangladéšské manželky a jistotu domova. Tato postupná Nazneenina emancipace evokuje myšlenku pokroku a nezávislosti.

Nazneenina mladší sestra Hasina může být považována za její přesný opak. V šestnácti letech uteče z domova a provdá se z lásky. Na rozdíl od Nazneen tak zůstává v Bangladéši a o jejích osudech se dozvídáme z dopisů, které si obě sestry pravidelně vyměňují. Hasina, která se rozhodne vzepřít svému osudu, si musí sama shánět obživu, což není v její situaci snadné. Vystřídá řadu zaměstnání, ocitne se dokonce na samém dně, ale vždy se jí podaří najít řešení. Hasina také představuje nezávislou ženu jako Nazneen, nedbá příliš na společenské konvence a muslimské tradice. Nemá však takové možnosti jako její sestra, která žije v liberální britské společnosti.

Razia je Nazneenina blízká přítelkyně, která jí pomáhá začlenit se do místní komunity a předává jí své zkušenosti, jelikož žije v Londýně déle než Nazneen. Pro své dvě děti, Tariqa a Shefali je ochotna udělat cokoli. I přesto, že se její syn Tariq stane drogově závislým, je natolik silná, že mu dokáže být oporou. Razia se v žádném případě nepodřizuje muslimským tradicím, naopak se snaží přijmout britský způsob života. V románu pomáhá Nazneen zásadním způsobem v její emancipaci a hraje roli její „ochránkyně“.

Paní Islámová, jejíž jméno symbolizuje muslimské náboženství a tradice, je považována v komunitě vzhledem ke svému věku za váženou a zkušenou ženu. Udržuje úzké kontakty se všemi místními Bangladéšany, aby jim mohla v případě finanční nouze poskytnout pomoc v podobě půjčky. Později však vyjde najevo, že si navíc účtuje přehnané úroky a její „pomoc“ se tak po dlužníky mění v noční můru. Aby získala své peníze zpět, neváhá používat i nekalé praktiky jako vydírání. Za každou cenu se snaží udržet si své postavení v bangladéšské komunitě. V románu je jednoznačně negativní postavou, která však končí poražená.

Chanu, Nazneenin manžel, představuje vzdělaného bangladéšského přistěhovalce, který touží po úspěchu a kariérním postupu. V Nazneen vidí pouze poslušnou manželku, která se vzorně stará o děti a domácnost. Její potřeby a přání ho však příliš nezajímají. Když zjistí, že možnost jeho povýšení je v nedohlednu, podá výpověď a začne pracovat jako taxikář. Jeho sny o slibné kariéře se tak rozplývají. Chanu zanevře na celou britskou společnost, kterou považuje za rasistickou a zkaženou. Rozhodne se vrátit i s rodinou do Bangladéše, jakmile našetří dost peněz na cestu. Když mu však Nazneen oznámí, že s dcerami zůstane v Londýně, Chanu odjíždí sám, protože cítí, že on zůstat nemůže.

Karim je mladý Bangladéšan druhé generace žijící v Londýně. Do Nazneenina života vstoupí jako zprostředkovatel práce, v románu však postupně sehraje mnohem významnější

roli, a to jako Nazneenin milenec. Nazneen na Karimovi obdivuje především jeho sebevědomé vystupování. Má pocit, že Karim zcela zapadá do britské společnosti. Navíc ho zajímá její názor na rozdíl od Chanua. Nazneen u něj nachází to, co jí u manžela chybí. Díky Karimovi si uvědomí, co chce v životě dokázat, tudíž hraje významnou roli v její emancipaci. Karim se stane vůdcem muslimské skupiny, jejímž cílem je chránit a šířit islám a jeho tradice. Jakmile se však skupina rozpadne, stává se z něj radikál, který ztrácí své obvyklé sebevědomí, ale také své místo v britské společnosti. Poté, co mu Nazneen oznámí, že zůstává v Londýně, ale vzít si ho nechce, odjíždí Karim do Bangladéše.

Dr. Azad je blízkým přítelem Chanua a Nazneen. Zajímá se o problémy londýnské bangladéšské komunity, zejména o nezaměstnanost, alkoholismus, drogovou závislost a pouliční gangy. Často s Chanuem hovoří o údelu přistěhovalců. Dr. Azad zkoumá zajímavý fenomén Bangladéšanů ve Velké Británii, a to „Syndrom návratu domů“, který vysvětluje tak, že Bangladéšané opouští svou rodnou zemi pouze fyzicky, nadále k ní zůstávají připoutáni citově. Dělají tak vše pro to, aby se co nejdříve vrátili domů. Dr. Azad je zajímavou postavou i z toho důvodu, že jeho domácnost ovládá svérázná manželka a on je ten, který se musí ve všem podřídít. Jeho žena i dcera žijí britským způsobem života, tudíž na něm nejsou nijak závislé. Dr. Azad tak zažívá stejný pocit jako Chanu a Karim, a to, že v britské společnosti selhal. Je to on, kdo půjčí Chanuovi peníze na cestu domů, pravděpodobně proto, že chce zachránit jiné manželství, když jeho vlastní ztroskotalo.

Ze studia jednotlivých ženských a mužských postav je možné vyvodit, že tradiční dominantní postavení bangladéšských mužů je v britské společnosti oslabeno, v mnoha případech ho přebírá žena. Ženské postavy si vybojují práva a svobodu, stávají se z nich nezávislé a sebevědomé osobnosti. Jelikož jsou morálně silné, poměrně rychle se začlení do britské společnosti, ve které také zůstávají. Mužským románovým postavám se nepodaří uspět v této společnosti, přicházejí o iluze, a tak opouštějí Británii a vracejí se do Bangladéše. Z toho vyplývá, že jsou morálně slabí a nepřizpůsobiví na rozdíl od jejich ženských protějšků.

Román Monicy Ali *Brick Lane* patří do britské poválečné etnické literatury, tudíž jsem v první části své práce představila autory tohoto směru, ale i témata, kterými se zabývají. Jelikož ústředním tématem britské etnické literatury je přistěhovalec a jeho postavení v Británii, věnovala jsem se stručně také imigraci do Velké Británie. Dále jsem se zaměřila na etnické složení londýnské populace, detailněji pak na bangladéšskou komunitu, která dominuje východní části Londýna. V závěrečné části jsem představila hlavní ženské a mužské postavy románu, kteří jsou všichni bangladéšští přistěhovalci první generace. Zjistila jsem, že

ženské postavy symbolizují pokrok a úspěch, zatímco mužské postavy představují zklamání a neúspěch.

Anotace

Bakalářská práce vychází z románu britské spisovatelky Monicy Ali *Brick Lane*. Román sleduje osudy několika bangladéšských přistěhovalců v Londýně. První část práce představuje kontext poválečné britské etnické literatury. Zaměřuje se na autory a témata jejich děl. Jejich nejčastějším tématem je přistěhovalec a jeho zkušenost v Británii nebo jiné zemi. Autoři etnické literatury se zajímají jak o pocity imigrantů, tak o problémy, kterým musí čelit v nové zemi. Dále práce popisuje imigraci do Velké Británie, zejména po roce 1945, a nejvýznamnější etnické menšiny žijící v Londýně. Detailněji se zaměřuje na bangladéšskou komunitu, která dominuje čtvrti Brick Lane. Závěrečná část představuje hlavní románové postavy a zabývá se ženskými a mužskými rolemi v tradiční bangladéšské komunitě. Jelikož jedním z hlavních témat románu *Brick Lane* je emancipace hlavní hrdinky a dalších ženských postav, může být považován za feministický.

Summary

The thesis is based on Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane*. The novel follows the stories of a number of Bangladeshi immigrants in London. The first part of the thesis presents the context of post-war British ethnic literature. It focuses on the authors and the themes of their works. The most frequent theme is the immigrant and his/her experience in Britain or another country. The ethnic authors are interested in the immigrants' feelings as well as in the problems they have to face in their new country. The thesis also describes immigration to Great Britain after 1945 and the most prominent ethnic minorities in London. In particular, it focuses on the Bangladeshi community which dominates London's East End. The final part presents the main protagonists of the novel and it deals with the female and male roles in the traditional Bangladeshi community. The novel can be considered as feminist since one of its main themes is the emancipation of the main female protagonist and other female characters.

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