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DOUBLY OPPRESSED IMMIGRANTS IN *BRICK LANE*

Brick Lane Romanında Çifte Ezilmiş Göçmenler

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Abstract

The present study aims to delve into the novel Brick Lane by Monica Ali in respect to two primary factors which lead immigrants to be face to face with oppression and discrimination in Britain. Their skin colours and Muslim identities comprise a basis that assigns the position of these immigrants in that European land under discussion in which they have to cope with certain financial problems, physical attacks and threats. As a result, both a dark skin and being a Muslim mean double oppression in London.

Keywords: Monica Ali, Black Immigrants, Muslim Immigrants, London, Oppression

Öz

Bu araştırma Monica Ali tarafından yazılan Brick Lane romanını göçmenlerin İngiltere'de eziyet ve ayrımcılıkla yüz yüze gelmelerine öncülük eden iki ana faktör ile ilgili olarak derinlemesine incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Onların belirli finansal sorunlar, fiziksel saldırı ve tehditlerle baş etmek zorunda oldukları söz konusu Avrupa ülkesinde pozisyonlarını tayin eden zemini ten renkleri ve Müslüman kimlikleri oluşturur. Sonuç olarak, hem koyu ten hem de Müslüman olmak Londra'da çifte eziyet anlamına gelir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Monica Ali, Siyah Göçmenler, Müslüman Göçmenler, Londra, Eziyet

1. INTRODUCTION

In the postcolonial period, not only the structure of once colonized nations but also the traits of the Western societies have been transformed due to the emergence of multicultural populations in the metropolitan cities of the Western nations. The settlement of immigrants from diverse Eastern countries has led the relevant discussions to focus on the issues of whether the relationship between the white and black people is retained just as it was in the colonial period and founded on oppression, racism, discrimination and coercion or this sort of relationship has dwindled away as a result of formal decolonization. Both of these possibilities need to be enlightened by means of concrete evidence which could be found in experiences of immigrants and which could be accepted as more verifiable instead of being solely based on unsettled controversies that revolve around a vicious circle.

London became one of the most promising gathering locations of Europe for the citizens of ex-colonized nations with its reputation and

potential. Attributing to the multi-ethnic face of the British land particularly in the middle and second half of the twentieth century, Weedon argues that "... the arrival of substantial numbers of Muslim, after 1945, mainly from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, but also refugee populations from Muslim countries like Somalia, helped change the face of the society in the second half of the twentieth century" (2004, p. 145). While these immigrants sought to do their best in their working lives in order to display their ceaseless effort and become a part of the British nation, the fact that the same effort by the British society as an indication of gratitude was shown became an issue being open to discussion and evidence. This kind of influx of immigrants resulted in alienated second generation immigrants and their clash with their parents and grandparents, switching this once "imperial metropolis" to a global "transcultural" urban setting (McLeod, 2004, p. 7). The number of foreign citizens who had black skins and belonged to a variety of belief systems was increasing each day, which could not escape from the attention of the British public.

The problems between the first and second generation immigrants were very widespread and emanated from the fact that the younger immigrants were not born in their native land and did not experience their indigenous culture as tightly and directly as their parents did, growing up in an unfamiliar scene where they unsurprisingly absorbed the Western culture to a large extent; however, they could not escape from their native culture and origins once they witnessed that the British citizens did not want them to be integrated into their world and once they were also forced by their parents to maintain their original beliefs and cultural values. Namely, while exhibiting certain tendencies to esteem the British culture and civilization, these immigrants' identities rotated on their conventional, linguistic, religious and national properties, which supplied them with an apparent anti-British sensitivity (Modood 2005, p. 458). Even the certainty of protecting and keeping themselves completely away from the impacts of the Western world was a questionable matter in terms of the first generation immigrants.

Down from their arrival in Britain, these immigrants were seen as uninvited guests by the British society; therefore, the outcome of that process proved to a state of entire disappointment since they witnessed an explicit incompatibility between their ambitions they had before arrival in the imperial centre and reality after their establishment. As McLeod puts across, "... officious metropolitan responses to the settlement of diaspora communities have tended to ignore many newcomers' cultural and historical differences and mobilized instead the homogenizing modality of race" even

though these permanent guests had a variety of historical and social experiences that made it really too complex to reach oversimplified assumptions about these minority groups (2004, p. 22). In a sense, the British citizens wanted to see them as only those who had black skins rather than any other virtues. “In its view Britain has over the centuries evolved a distinct culture which is integrally tied up with its national identity and should continue to enjoy a privileged status” (Parekh, 2000, p. 6). Consequently, the immigrants had to bow to the inevitable racist approaches and a lesser status in the British society, thus not being able to take advantage of a favoured position which the white community enjoys. Having to confront the notion that they consisted of stereotypes that assume the same attributes without any exception, these immigrants were categorized and generalized according to their races and cultures.

In addition to the factor of race, religion could also be considered to have had an effective role in determining the situation of the immigrants in the British society as in other European nations. Muslims living in the Western countries frequently complained that they were doubly discriminated owing to their both race and religion, not being protected by the law against any offensive attitudes toward their racial and religious values (Modood, 1993, p. 147). This lack of any legal protection contributed to emergence of oppressive attempts against the Muslim immigrants' freedom to live their religion without any worry. Despite the fact that some amendments were made in order to inhibit racist discrimination in Britain in the last decades of the twentieth century, “Muslimness provided the focus and basis of difference that the new racists necessarily required” (Allen, 2005, p. 53). Thus, Islam was becoming another kind of justification and excuse for discrimination and racism. After the 9/11 events, Muslims were identified with terrorism, violence and some crimes that became one of the most alarming dangers emphasized in the law (Allen, 2005, 54). The 9/11 attacks signalled the first signs of the beginning of a new era in which Muslims all over the world would have to face worse accusations and persecution in return for those events they have never approved of.

2. DOUBLE OPPRESSION IN *BRICK LANE*

The reader can encounter a variety of subject matters in *Brick Lane* such as multicultural issues, immigration, economic, religious and cultural concerns of Bangladeshi immigrants in London (Bhillade, 2013). Nazneen, the main character, leaves her homeland and arrives in England in order to manage her life with her husband, Chanu. Monica Ali draws upon the poor economic conditions in which these immigrants try to live as well as the

cultural and religious conflicts between the Western nation and these Eastern populations. Possibly not thinking that the Western countries welcome and embrace immigrants of the Eastern descent, the author sets out to exhibit these immigrants' strenuous effort to preserve their religious beliefs and culture in a Western metropolitan city in which they are exposed to disapproving eyes of the white citizens.

Even though the plot of the novel centres upon the troubles of the Bangladeshi immigrants that often feel being subject to discrimination and racist attitudes in London, the writer narrates not only the Bangladeshi minority groups but also other black immigrants who also have to tolerate such contemptuous acts in the city. To illustrate, after getting on the bus and seeing that the driver is a black person, Chanu says to Nazneen: "Look how fit he is ... So big. So strong. You see ... They were bred for it. Slavery ... Only the strong survived that. Only the strong ones were wanted; they fetched the highest price" (Ali, 2003, p. 76). This notion of Chanu also signifies the image of black people that goes back to the long years of being enslaved and cast as poor things and that has revealed itself even among the black people discerning the disadvantage of black skins. Chanu stresses the point that skin colour serves as a determining factor in what position and employment a person would be in Britain while uttering that "Commerce and natural selection work hand in hand" (Ali, 2003, p. 76). In this natural selection, blacks as the weak and inferior ones have to serve whites being the more developed and civilized ones, or blacks would be removed from such a system. In a similar way, Chanu mentions the status of the Bangladeshi immigrants in Britain who are accepted to belong to an inferior class as follows: "And you see, to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little donkeys all in the same monkey clan." (Ali, 2003, p. 15). The British community as a dominant and powerful group designates the function of each of the minority group members in accordance with their physical features, confining the black ones merely to the lower class labour and status.

As a Bangladeshi immigrant arriving in Britain six years ago, Chanu had great expectations for his successful career and thought that he would attain a rewarding job right after his arrival, recounting his hopeful feelings in the following lines:

When I came I was a young man. I had ambitions. Big dreams. When I got off the plane, 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 (Ali, 2003, p. 21).

With his education and intelligence, he supposed that he would become a prominent figure and be recognized by the British community among other native immigrants, who do not have any profound scholarship and knowledge and belong to the unlettered masses. Being proud of his distinguished capacity and personal ability due to reading a large number of books from literature, philosophy, history, sociology and so on, Chanu is depicted as a Bangladeshi immigrant who deserves to ascend the elite class and make his dreams real; however, he observes that his ambitions and dreams are turned into frustration and grief after experiencing the real aspect of being a black and Muslim immigrant in Britain.

The author displays the fact that those whose ambitions are disrupted and prevented from becoming real are not only immigrants but their families and relatives as well who in the native land wait for the assistance of these immigrants. Chanu exemplifies this fact by saying: "The begging letters still come ... From the old servants, from the children of servants. Even from my own family, although they are not in need. All they can think of is money." (Ali, 2003, p. 21). Poverty and shortage have seemed to be predominant in the native land since the colonialist powers withdrew and left Bangladesh in misery. Once colonized slaves and their families count upon educated ones like Chanu who they think could climb the higher class membership in Europe and send money to them in order to make their lives better. Nevertheless, they understand that the immigrants cannot reach a high status and career in metropolitan cities such as London even if they are looking forward to receiving letters, dispatched by the immigrants, that give positive replies and promises that money they wait for will be sent to them very soon. Hence Ali insinuates the perception that the British metropolis breeds frustration and grief for the native people in Bangladesh as well as the immigrants in the Western cities.

Chanu compares himself with other white colleagues and asserts that he merits promotion in his career owing to his degrees and knowledge that he thinks very few white British citizens have. He says: "... when I have my Open University degree then nobody can question my credentials. Although

Dhaka University is one of the best in the world, these people here by and large ignorant and know nothing of the Brontes or Thackery” (Ali, 2003, p. 25). In spite of being a lettered person and carrying such outstanding qualities which can be just enough to find a high-standard job, Chanu does not regard other factors that certainly play a more effective role in achieving in having much higher standards for his social and working life.

It takes him a while to notice that his race and skin colour will pose serious problems for promotion in his working life, and he ultimately witnesses that he will get no promotion, thus beginning to feel that his dreams will never become real in his career and that he has to manage his life under lower standards. For instance, his wife Nazneen says to Razia:

My husband says they are racist, particularly Mr. Dalloway. He thinks he will get the promotion, but it will take him longer than any white man. He says that if he painted his skin pink and white then there would be no problem (Ali, 2003, p. 53).

Here, Chanu appears as a Bangladeshi immigrant who begins to be aware of the trouble of being black in Britain and its drawback for his own career. And Chanu also emphasizes the same truth regarding the white British community’s racist and disparaging attitudes toward them by claiming that:

(I)t is the white underclass, like Wilkie, who are most afraid of people like me. To him, and people like him, we are the only thing standing in the way of them sliding totally to the bottom of the pile. As long as we are below them, then they are above something. If they see us rise then they are resentful because we have left our proper place. (Ali, 2003, 24)

What Chanu observes while he is among the white citizens in Britain can confirm the fact that discriminatory and racist ideologies against dark skinned immigrants are still widespread in the Western communities albeit formal colonialism has ended in the second half of the twentieth century and albeit it is often announced in the Western media that views on blacks and other nations have altered as time has changed lots of things in the world. According to Chanu’s statement, there still exists a wide gap between the blacks and whites in Britain because of a predetermined categorization of people in accordance with their skin colours. In the eyes of the British citizens, black immigrants have to acquiesce to their position as members of

the lower class, and if they attempt to go beyond their boundaries, hatred of the white population will deepen against them.

The author portrays the tragic situation of Chanu as that of a Bangladeshi immigrant who cannot gain any access to upper-class jobs and who has to accept lower-class jobs which require physical power and skill instead of mental capacity. As Miles and Brown underscore, “Since the 1950s, the British labour market has been racialized in this way ... First, many employers refused to employ any ‘coloured’ workers, and most would only do so where there was no other source of labour power available” (2004, p. 132). That is, the black people have been used as substitutes for white people especially when any surplus parts of labour that have to be filled urgently remains in the work force. The writer conveys it in the novel as follows:

His plans, to which he gave his all and from which he expected so much, had deserted him ... He started every new job with a freshly spruced suit and a growing collection of pens. His face shone with hope. And then grayed with frustration, with resentment. He began business with a visit to the shoe repairer and made outlays on hard-sided, brisk briefcases ... The Jobcentre called him for an interview. He was offered a job washing dishes in a restaurant (Ali, 2003, p. 164).

His expectation to get an upper-class job in Britain is reduced to a sort of despair and helplessness that force him to consent to run errands that he has never guessed and desired. Besides being put into a lesser status in working life, Chanu also has to endure disrespectful and contemptuous reactions of the British community as is narrated by the author: “But he was slighted. By customers, by suppliers, by superiors and inferiors. He worked hard for respect but he could not find it. There was in the world a great shortage of respect and Chanu was among the famished” (Ali, 2003, p. 164). The experiences and disadvantages of the black immigrants in Britain can be exemplified by Chanu’s misery and his being unable to find a job that is convenient for his intellectual capacity. Even in the last decades of the twentieth century and in the twenty-first century, British leaders’ discriminatory and racist policies did not change in a positive manner, which Kundnani argues as follows: “African-Caribbean and Asian communities were cast as an ‘alien wedge’ threatening to disrupt the homogeneity that was supposedly essential to the national order. Margaret Thatcher had already expressed this idea a year before she took office...” (2007, p. 43).

Hence this discriminatory policy can be seen to have arisen not only from the British society but from the ruling elites at the top of the society that announce racial issue as the one which runs the risk of endangering the stable order and uniformity of the British population.

Since male immigrants, as a result of discriminatory attitudes in the white society, had to work in minor jobs which did not provide any high income, their wives began to feel it essential to find a job and add to the family budget on account of high life standards in Europe (Brah, 1996, p. 69-70). One of the main issues the novel touches upon is that discrimination and racism caused the Bangladeshi immigrants to experience some radical changes in their family lives and gender roles. For instance, after Razia says to Nazneen: "I'll get a job myself. I told him straight," Nazneen replies that "Mrs. Islam says Jorina has been ashamed. Her husband goes with other women. She started work, and everyone said, 'He cannot feed her.' Even though he was working himself, he was shamed." (Ali, 2003, p. 74). This dialogue displays how poor economic circumstances draw these immigrants into ignoring their traditional social norms and focusing only on seeking out ways which can alleviate their poverty and sufferings even if these ways can be against their strictly obeyed traditions. Their traditional beliefs order the Bangladeshi wives not to work outside their homes but to bring up their children and do housework; however, as a result of undergoing racist policies which leave them in poor conditions, these females think that their financial problems will not be solved unless they begin to work for their families.

As well as the racial factor and their origins, the immigrants' religious tendencies are presented by Ali as the other source of disadvantages and oppression which they are forced to experience and put up with in the British land. Thus, author aims to impart the unbearable fact of being a Muslim in Britain or Europe especially after the 9/11 attacks that have made Muslims a kind of target of the Western nations' hatred and attacks. Concerning the status of Muslims for the European societies, Fekete argues: "They do not merely threaten Europe as 'the enemy within' in the war on terror, their adherence to Islamic norms and values threatens the notion of Europeanness itself" (2009, p. 44). Like other Western countries, Britain sees Islam and its believers as the source of evil which poses certain obstructions and risks to her development as well as so-called purity. Its danger for Europe springs from the fact that "The world of Islam, unlike other challenges, encompasses a worldview, a way of life, a historical formation as well as a geographical space, stretching from Morocco to

Southeast Asia” (Pieterse, 2002, 21). However, the Western nations do not take into consideration a remarkable detail as regards the fact that a diverse set of beliefs and groups exist in Islam. Modood puts forward this ignored truth as follows: “Muslims are not, however, a homogenous group. Some Muslims are devout but apolitical; some are political but do not see their politics as being Islamic (indeed, they may even be anti-Islamic)” (2009, p. 193). Consequently, these varieties need to be recognized and clarified when believers of other religions make any comment about the Muslim world and making any references to Islam after terrorist attacks arise.

In the novel, it is narrated that some leaflets which take in daunting warnings and messages for the Muslim immigrants are left in the letterboxes of the Bangladeshi citizens and on the walls of some buildings, as a result of which these immigrants suppose that their lives are constantly under danger due to the British citizens’ rage and accusations against them. To exemplify, Chanu’s daughter finds a leaflet in the letterbox and brings it to him who then sees that the leaflet mentions Christianity as “one of the world’s great religions” while attributing to Islam as “a religion of hatred and intolerance” (Ali, 2003, p. 205). This resentful attitude to Muslims makes it obvious that Bangladeshi and other Muslim immigrants in Britain feel anxious and oppressed owing to the Western perception that Islam does not represent any peaceful and humanistic conception. This Islamophobic approach of the Western societies to Muslims can be summarized in the following way: “It obliterates national, cultural, regional, political and religious distinctions, thus giving rise to a proliferation of stereotypical generalisations about ‘Muslim culture’ and the Islamic mind-set” (Fekete, 2009, p. 194). Not regarding any individual differences between Muslims in their religious beliefs and practices and not figuring on the effects of cultural and national attributes on Muslims’ lives, the Western communities try to identify each low quality and act with the Muslim population across the world.

While raising the issue of the Muslim immigrants’ sufferings and plight because of their religious identities and perceptions, the author does not disregard the aftermath of 9/11 in which the Western rage and hatred against them appeared as sharper and more profound. It is recounted in the novel that:

A pinch of dust New York dust blew across the ocean and settled on the Dogwood Estate. Sorupa’s daughter was the first, but not the only one. Walking on the street, on her to college, she had her hijab pulled off. Razia wore her Union Jack sweatshirt and it was spat on (Ali, 2003, p. 306).

Although Sorupa's daughter and Razia have not been played any role in the 9/11 attacks and not been involved in any violent attack against the Western citizens, they become the focus of physical attacks and insulting behaviors in that they belong to the Muslim population. Through oppression and violence these characters confront whenever they come across citizens of other religions, particularly Christianity, the novel draws attention to the fact that Muslims in European countries are often accused of such terror attacks as the events of 9/11 and that Muslims become the target of violent attacks and affronting acts that emerge as a reaction to the 9/11 attacks.

In order to underline more intense rage of the British citizens against the Muslims living in Britain, Allen claims that: "Given the negative recognition British society has of Muslims, both types of Muslim have through the same lens become increasingly non-differentiated: in essence, whether 'terrorists' or 'apologists' all Muslims in the UK have become virtually identical." (2010, p. 86). Whether they advocated the 9/11 attacks or opposed them have not meant anything to the British nation; what is essential has been the name of their religion as Islam and their religious identities as Muslims instead of what they think or do. With regard to the physical attacks against the Muslims in Britain in the pos-9/11 because of their Islamic appearance and identity, he continues to emphasize those Muslims' experiences:

It is for this reason that in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Muslim (and Sikh) men that resembled Usama bin Laden – however insignificantly, possibly only having a beard or wearing a turban – were attacked thousands of miles away from where he himself was alleged to have been. Visual difference and the meanings attributed to this therefore transcends geographical boundaries and proximities thus making all Muslims along with the visual identifiers of Islam legitimate targets for hatred and abuse. (2010, p. 86)

From that respect, the writer deals with the idea that the attacks of 11 September 2001 have functioned as both one of the most influential events that reinforced the rage and hatred of the Western societies against the Muslim world and one of the most obvious occasions which made a large number of Muslims responsible and nominally guilty even though it has not been ascertained who the attackers were and for what ideology they served yet.

In the novel, the British citizens accuse Muslims and Islam of terrorism and violence, but they cannot find out any obvious rule or reference point in Islam which orders Muslims to kill innocent people whoever they are and whatever religion they belong to. Ali makes clear that the British population establishes an organization called the Lion Hearts whose ambition is to spread anti-Islamic notions and to arrange marches against the existence of Islam and the Muslim immigrants in Britain so as to insist on attribution of 9/11 attacks and cruelty to other innocent Muslims across the world who have never approved of these attacks and terrorism. Therefore, the events of 9/11 are manipulated by the colonialist groups, who were already waiting to sharpen the feelings of discrimination, in order to stigmatize the Islamic religion as the producer of terrorists and plunderers for the Western world. Cesari gives emphasis to the affront and disgrace Muslims were subjected to in the following lines:

In the post-September 11 context, both European and American Muslims have faced relentless correlations between Islam, seen as an international political threat, and Muslims in general (even those living in democratic nations, as has been shown by the hostile reactions that followed the attacks of 11 September 2001) (2007, p. 52).

Focusing on the point that the innocent Muslim immigrants are subject to oppression and coercion on account of their religion even though they do not concern themselves with any terrorist attacks and murder, Ali probably implies the idea that the whole Muslim world cannot be blamed for any brutal activity as there can be some radical groups in each religion and ideology that are ready to consult to violence and merciless attacks while voicing their beliefs and preserving their membership to their religion. That is, just as the Christian religion involves different sects that retain totally different and conflicting views, so does Islam hold a number of religious sects which endorse opposing notions in many aspects. Thus, if there exists any Islamic rule which commands its members to carry out illegitimate and offensive acts against blameless people of other religions, the Western scholars have to be aware of an urgent necessity to reveal evidently which Islamic sect covers and advocates such brutal attitudes instead of reaching too generalized conclusions for other innocent Muslims belonging to other sects that keenly oppose cruelty, unjust violence and immoral attempts.

Muslims also need to be mindful of accusing all of the members and sects of Christianity concerning wars where innocent Muslim children and women were killed ruthlessly. Muslims cannot support improper and

unsustainable violence against the Western people by referring to the Crusades and claiming that the same violence were perpetrated on innocent Muslims since not all of the Christians and religious sects support the Crusades' violence and brutality. To put it another way, the author draws attention to the possible dangers of overgeneralization about any religion by suggesting that this tendency is very likely to kindle hostility and conflicts between nations and communities in a nation.

3. CONCLUSION

Monica Ali is likely to advocate the idea that oppression and discrimination are among the most apparent experiences of the Bangladeshi immigrants in Britain like other black immigrants. She also seeks to research the potential reasons for such scolding attitudes toward the immigrants and seems to come to the conclusion that skin colors and the Islamic religion can be accepted as the two principal factors that cause the immigrants to be treated as the lowest group of citizens in Britain. As black people, these immigrants in the novel are obliged to live through the racist and discriminatory approach of the white British citizens not wanting to see these immigrants in their country. In addition, the immigrants as Muslims are forced to handle the physical attacks and hatred of the British community because they are frequently identified with terrorism and violent actions albeit they are not relevant to such attempts. The novel sheds light on the anxieties and fears of the Muslims immigrants which increase as a result of the 9/11 attacks that have begun to be used as an excuse by the Western world to voice rage against Islam and the Muslim immigrants in Europe. Consequently, one of the major subject matters the author conveys implicitly in *Brick Lane* is that being both a black and Muslim immigrant in Britain means that one's status is lowered twice in the British society.

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