

Cultural Clash: Crisis of Identity

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Abstract: *The notion of cultural clash has come into focus recently as a consequence of the globalization of the modern world although it has always been there in reality since there have been diverse ethnic groups possessing different cultures in the same and different countries since the pre-historic time. Generally, when one culture begins to get stronger, tries to assert itself over another culture, and the other culture starts to fight back in return to preserve its own cultural identity, then the cultural clash takes place. Writers from all over the world have been exploring this theme of how exposure to a different culture results in serious cultural clash, affecting in turn people's lives drastically, in their works. For this paper, we have selected two world renowned writers, Monica Ali (1967-), a Bangladeshi British writer, and Kiran Desai (1971-), an Indian author, from this sub-continent, as they have examined this idea of cultural clash and its impact on the lives of the major characters of their respective novels Brick Lane (2003) and The Inheritance of Loss (2006). The two novels have depicted graphically that exposure to another culture mainly results in loss of identity, alienation, and ambivalence regarding one's own cultural identity; however, side by side both the novels have also shown a few cases where it seems that knowing and living in a different culture can have positive results. This paper examines these issues in details.*

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Brick Lane- named after Brick Lane, a street at the heart of London's Bangladeshi community- depicts the story of Nazneen who is married off to a much older man, Chanu. Chanu, an educated man, struggles in this foreign country to lead a respectable life. But he fails to earn respect from the whites and is slighted everywhere. So, he searches for solace in his family and tries to instill Bangladeshi culture into his elder daughter, Shahana's mind which she arrogantly defies. At the end of the novel, Chanu returns to Bangladesh while Nazneen stays back in Banglatown with their daughters.

On the other hand, in *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai narrates the story of a retired Judge who lives in Kalimpong, at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas, with his orphaned grand-daughter, Sai, and his cook. Being educated in Cambridge, the Judge was so much influenced by the Western culture that he started to hate every Indian

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person, including himself and his own family. Meanwhile, Sai, whose father was a Russian, falls in love with a local Nepalis boy, Gyan. Another important character in the book, the cook's son, Biju, lives miserably as an illegal immigrant in New York. All of these characters struggle with their cultural identity.

In this paper, by 'culture', we understand Raymond Williams' third category in the definition of culture and he calls it the 'social' definition (57). To define this in Williams' own words:

[C]ulture is a description of the particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior. (57)

When cultural clash takes place, it results in loss of a particular way of life- one's ancestral identity- and assimilation into another culture. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, the Judge's anglophilia marks him as a self-hating Indian and a foreigner to everyone including himself. To suppress his Indian past and elevate himself above others in his community, the Judge holds fast to a pseudo-English identity which makes him dissatisfied with his own identity:

He...found his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely manage to lift his lips in a smile, and if he ever did, he held his hand over his mouth, because he couldn't bear anyone to see his gums, his teeth. ...He began to wash obsessively; concerned he would be accused of smelling. (40)

His self-hatred goes to such an extreme that he prefers his western name 'James Peter Paterson' to his own name 'Jemubhai Popatlal Patel'. This self-hatred, in return, leads him to abhor the people around him. Among the people who suffer most is his wife, Nimi, whom he loved once but now rejects on the basis that everything about her seems Indian and "[an] Indian girl could never be as beautiful as the English one" (168). Distinguishing and distancing himself from his Indian wife, first mentally and then physically, makes him feel less Indian. The Judge's attempts at distancing himself from Nimi generally involve emotional neglect and physical abuse. The narrator describes a particularly graphic instance of the Judge's behavior towards his wife:

One day he found footprints on the toilet seat-*she was squatting on it, she was squatting on it*-he could barely contain his outrage, took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl, and after a point, Nimi, made invalid by her misery, grew very dull. (173)

In response to his cruelty, Nimi completely shatters. She suffers so much humiliation at the hand of her husband that gradually she stops living and becomes a living-in-dead person, in other words, a zombie-like creature. She becomes his suppressed Indian self

and he becomes “the machinery of cultural domination” in the guise of the representative of the Occident (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 53). His abhorrence towards his own family is particularly evident in his rejection of his parents’ affection and in his disgust at his new-born child. The denial of umbilical relation is manifested in his throwing away the packed food given by his mother in the ocean and in defining his mother’s love as “undignified love, stinking, unaesthetic love” (38). Moreover, Jemubhai even begins to despise his new-born child without seeing her, with the preconceived notion of racism. The only reason he ceases to hate the grand- daughter, Sai, is because he finds that Sai is very unlike her mother and grandmother. It turns out that Sai “was more his kin than he had thought imaginable. There was something familiar about her; she had the same accent and manners” (210). Thus, the force of cultural clash drives Jemubhai to reject his own ancestral heritage and dictates him to hate himself, his family members, and all Indian people.

Confrontation with another culture can make a person feel alienated both in his/her homeland and the foreign land. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Jemubhai’s rejection of his family as well as his native heritage in pursuit of false ideals makes him an alienated person in his own land. Another character, Biju’s estrangement originates from his immigration to New York, being driven by the fantasy and the illusion about the West. The reality turns out to be very different and a handful of other expatriates have to encounter the same bitter experience. The sense of anguish permeates throughout the novel as it is proclaimed by B.P. Giri, “It is clear from this caste of uprooted characters that a certain sense of alienation and loss, said to be an integral part of the diasporic condition, is at the heart of the novel’s inheritance.” We see a similar scenario with Chanu, in *Brick Lane* where he becomes alienated as he feels suppressed by the dominant culture of the West. Since Chanu wants to uphold his language, tradition and culture, he feels alienated in his own workplace and family. His desire to be with a group of people who share the same race, culture, and language is mainly caused by the maltreatment of the British. In his workplace, he is slighted “[b]y customers, by superiors and inferiors. He worked hard for respect but he could not find it” (167). On the other hand, the explicit clash between Chanu and his daughter Shahana results in Chanu’s estrangement from his own family. Chanu strongly disapproves of Shahana’s inclination to Western culture. He attempts to teach her Bangla classical music and literary works by Rabindranath Tagore. He prefers Bengali foods to Western foods. To him, Western culture is “(t)elelevision, pub, throwing darts, kicking a ball. That is the white working class culture” (210) and he wants to bring up his children without the influence of Western culture. He repeatedly addresses these issues to his wife Nazneen. Being anxious about his son’s future, he says to his wife, “I don’t want him to rot here with all the skinheads and drunks. I don’t want him to grow up in this racist society” (91). Chanu’s acute alienation in his family and workplace spurs his desire to go back to his ancestral homeland. To him, “Bengal is the paradise of Nations” (151) and in this foreign land he only encounters “...the clash of cultures...of generations” (91) and to him, “To be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy” (91). Therefore, it can be said that the consequence of cultural clash is alienation. Both Jemubhai and Chanu undergo this experience irrespective of their spatial differences.

Exposure to a different culture can also create ambivalence regarding one's own cultural identity. The resulting situation "challenges all to face the same heart-wrenching questions that haunt the immigrant: Who am I? Where do I belong?" (Kehe 13). In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Gyan provides a fairly straightforward example of ambivalence which is evident in his wavering between his desire to spend time with Sai, a Westernized Indian woman, and to shun her to avoid the Western influence so that it cannot be a part of him. This clash between Gyan's identity and Sai's Westernized upbringing and lifestyle results in a traumatic relationship between the two. Gyan becomes a split person- on the one hand, he wants to be a Gurkha warrior and on the other hand, he wants to remain close with Sai. In order to keep his ethnic identity untainted, he desires to "leave this fussy pair, Sai and her grandfather with the fake English accents and face powdered pink and white over brown" (176) as these two characters, in his eyes, reflect a false representation of culture. The fights between Sai and Gyan illustrate ambivalence particularly well. They have their first big fight after Gyan experiences the Gurkha National Liberation Front Movement and starts trying to follow his own ethnic identity. For Gyan, Indians celebrate certain holidays and not Christmas, which to him is necessarily Western. For Sai, Indians may celebrate Christmas, which she says is as Indian as other holidays. Gyan responds by calling Sai a copycat, a mimic of the West. Finally, Gyan responds to this dilemma by embracing extreme aggression in an attempt to move him out of this middle position. At times we get an inside view into Gyan's mind and can see Gyan trying to suppress his fondness for Sai. He continues, however, to have feelings for her and to feel guilty for having those feelings. Unlike Gyan, Sai's ambivalence is originated from the inheritance of two ancestral identities. Born of Russian father and Indian mother, she possesses two cultural heritages. In the Convent, she was brought up by the English nuns, absorbing the English manners. She became used to a life of seemingly incongruous things, "economics and moral science, highland fling in taran and Punjabi harvest dance in dhotis, national anthem in Bengali and an impenetrable Latin motto emblazoned on banderoles across" (30). Consequently, she becomes a Westernized Indian. In this way, Gyan and Sai face dilemma regarding their roles in a society where various cultures exist.

However, exposure to a different culture may also bring forth positive results as these two novels show in some cases. Particularly, if one looks at the female characters portrayed in both the novels, one has to admit that a large number of them, instead of feeling agonized over this cultural issue and rejecting the foreign culture, welcomes the new environment and feels grateful for getting this chance of coming in contact to a new culture, which happens to be the Western culture here. Nevertheless, this statement does not overlook the initial sufferings of female characters, like the male characters, when they first migrate to the West and start living in a land with a totally different cultural background and atmosphere. In the novel *Brick Lane*, we get a detailed description of how Nazneen feels very lonely during the first months of her duration in London. She keeps fancying a visit to the 'tattoo lady' and has an actual conversation with her but dares not, thinking:

The tattoo lady might be angry at an unwanted interruption...And even if she wasn't angry, what would be the point? Nazneen could say two things in English: sorry and thank you. She could spend another day alone. It was only another day. (14)

Despite this we see that gradually a number of women characters start preferring the Western culture. To find evidence on behalf of this claim that many women characters prefer the new cultural atmosphere to their own culture, one can look at the novel *Brick Lane*. We find that by the time the novel ends, Nazneen refuses to go back to Bangladesh, asserting her own will on her dominant husband, Chanu. The occasional letters from Nazneen's sister Hasina also rule out any kind of nostalgic feelings for the social and cultural atmosphere of the world that she has left behind, "Hasina was in Dhaka but the city of her letters was an ugly place, full of dangers" (356). The letters render substantial meaning to Nazneen's indecisions whether to accompany Chanu back to her country and her final decision to stay back with her daughters where she is. Another character Mrs. Azad contends with Chanu when he says that their coming to London has caused cultural clash turning their lives into tragedy. According to her, her ability to work outside like any man has been recognized here which was unthinkable back in her own country. She accepts her daughter's Westernization as a natural thing to the point of cherishing this for herself: "My daughter is free to come and go. Do I wish I had enjoyed myself like her when I was young? Yes!" (93). In *The Inheritance of Loss*, we witness a similar incidence with Mr. Harish-Harry's wife. When she compares her present self in America with her former self in India, she feels self-satisfied with her changed self. Professor Kaiser Haq, one brilliant critic, has put this fact thus: "...the men dream of returning but not the women, who, even as second class citizens, enjoy rights denied them in the mother country" (23). So, the women characters in these novels undergo psychological growth and achieve freedom of choice regarding their lives through the influence of the Western culture.

In short, these two novels show that cultural exposure can bring people to the very verge of losing their own cultural identity. However, we notice that in case of women, coming in contact with another culture makes them aware of the shortcomings of their own culture, broadens their outlook, opens their mind, and changes their attitude to the ways of the world, and their fellow human beings. By the end of both the novels, we see that various characters have found a way to come to terms with this issue of cultural problem. The anguish of losing his foreign dog breaks Jemubhai's heart and makes him feel all the pains that he has caused to his family. Meanwhile, Gyan feels that he loves Sai instead of the difference in their identities and decides to make it up with her. On the other hand, Chanu understands he will never be able to assimilate into the Western culture and his family will not be able to adjust with Bangladeshi culture. So, he decides to move to Bangladesh and gives the freedom to his wife and daughters to continue living in the West. Thus, in the novels, some of the characters assimilate into the Western culture, some reject it, and some find a way to live in harmony with different cultures.

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