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Postcolonial Feminism and Diaspora: A Study of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract:
When the insights and methods of postcolonial studies were applied to the domain of feminism, they gave rise to a new intersectional and interdisciplinary field of study called postcolonial feminism. When the issues of women's freedom, representation, and enfranchisement were reimagined and recast in the light of race, colour, and nationality, it resulted in a more nuanced and profound understanding of the issues of gender-based marginalization and exploitation. This paper proposes to showcase these complex concerns of postcolonial feminism with reference to a detailed study of the feminist-diasporic novel *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali.

Keywords: Interdisciplinarity, Intersectionality, Diaspora, Double-Colonisation, Ideological Tourism.

Introduction:

Before we begin to deliberate on the extremely tangled and complex interplay of Postcolonialism and Feminism, it is advisable to offer a working definition of both. Postcolonialism is a term that includes a vast array of strategies to make sense of the predatory regime of political, cultural, psychological, and intellectual subjugation enforced by the imperialist and colonizing powers on the colonized people and races. As Elleke Boehmer puts it, postcolonial approaches are all "broadly concerned with experiences of exclusion, denigration, and resistance under systems of colonial control. Thus, the term postcolonialism addresses itself to the historical, political, cultural, and textual ramifications of the colonial encounter between the West and the Non-West." (Boehmer 340). In similar vein, Nadje Al-Ali defines the postcolonial as being "characterised by a series of transitions, a multiplicity of processes and developments towards decolonisation and de-centring of the 'West'" (Nadje12).

The theory of postcolonialism is a lens that can be applied to any manner of academic pursuits. The movement has roots in academic projects of decolonisation, such as Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), which argued for the decolonisation of not only the body but also the mind, and more famously Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Said's theory of orientalism illuminates the pervasive tradition of Western literature, art, and culture to

fetishise and stereotype representations of Eastern cultures and people, whilst privileging and prioritising the Western knowledge-systems to the extent that people outside the ken of the white races were, by definition, the 'other' or the pariah. Postcolonialism, considered as an idea or a project, is the practice of studying and theorising cultural fallouts and strategies of colonialism and of suggesting ways and means how those distortions were to be rectified.

Postcolonial feminism, therefore, is an exercise in intersectional study where the trajectories of postcolonial identity overlap with feminist concerns. It aims to understand and undo the legacies of colonialism within feminist activism. This in effect means that postcolonial feminism wants to decolonize feminist activism — reclaim it as more than just a pursuit of the western world and its people. Postcolonial feminist academic writing seeks to understand and interpret everyday lived experiences through a postcolonial perspective, de-centering the white, western, Eurocentric experience. Today no responsible critical framework talks of feminism in the singular; rather it has become critically mandatory to use "feminisms".

As the colonial enterprise wound up its innings and more and more countries became independent there was a churning in the offing, and it was gradually strongly felt that Western feminism which had its roots in the lives and experiences of the white woman would not be able to incorporate the life histories of women from the former colonies. Postcolonial feminism was basically a movement for the democratisation of the feminist experience, and in tune with all such attempts it began with the staunch rebuttal of the western pretensions of universalist knowledge and experience. In strong contrast to white feminism which tells us that equality is a universalist idea, and looks the same everywhere, postcolonial feminism reminds us that there are local and sectional variations in the application of these ideas in the West and elsewhere. For instance, while western feminism might advocate for, as an example, equal pay, that same concern may not be forefront for women outside of Europe and America. But it was forgotten that these were differences of detail and emphasis and eventually the issue of equal pay and equal working conditions would be raised elsewhere too with the spread of education.

The issue is that white feminism doesn't see this nuance, and in many ways elucidates the white saviour complex in its activism. For example, the US interference in Afghanistan and the war on terror in general was framed as a fight for gender equality. Laura Bush (wife of President George Bush), in a radio address about America's involvement, stated that "because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment… The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (US Government, 2002).

Feminist scholar Lila Abu-Lughod has compared Laura Bush's rhetoric to historical colonialism which often framed women's rights as a reason for continued oppression — for example in South Asia British rule was justified through intervention in child marriage, sati, and other practices. Other common instances of the white saviour complex in white feminism include protesting the wearing of the hijab in all situations, protesting for gay rights in other 'backwards' countries without accepting

the homophobia in our own home countries, and general narratives of 'civilising' other cultures.

Postcolonial feminism also draws our attention to the uncomfortable reality that colonialism is not really a thing of the past. The impacts colonialism and imperialism have had on the global order, and global capitalism mean that non-European and South-American countries and peoples continue to be exploited. This is often called 'neo-colonialism', and is understood as the use of economic, political, cultural, or other pressures to control or influence other countries, especially former dependencies.

Postcolonial feminism reminds us that, while some say that exploited peoples should 'let colonialism go' because it was so many hundreds of years ago, the effects of colonial and imperial endeavours continue to oppress. Postcolonial feminism invites us to look beyond what we deem objectively liberating and oppressive, right and wrong. It opens up the opportunity to create transnational rather than international alliances — i.e. grassroots and community movements supporting other grassroots and community movements in other countries, rather than imposing what we may believe is the path to equality. Postcolonial feminism is a way to look beyond the whitewashing of feminism, and to understand the nuance of power, geopolitics and money at play in the oppression and exploitation of various people, and thus for each feminist to become accountable for their own actions and activism. In reality, feminism is not feminism unless it is postcolonial.

In her pioneering critical study of the evolution of postcolonialism as an academic discipline, *Postcolonial Theory*: *A Critical Introduction*, Leela Gandhi devotes one full chapter to the exploration of the dialectical relation between postcolonialism and feminism. She contends that until recently, feminist and postcolonial theory have followed what Bill Ashcroft et al. call 'a path of convergent evolution' (Ashcroft et al., 1995, p. 249). As she says:

Both bodies of thought have concerned themselves with the study and defence of marginalized 'Others' within repressive structures of domination and, in so doing, both have followed a remarkably similar theoretical trajectory. Feminist and postcolonial theory alike began with an attempt to simply invert prevailing hierarchies of gender/culture/race, and they have each progressively welcomed the poststructuralist invitation to refuse the binary oppositions upon which patriarchal/colonial authority constructs itself. It is only in the last decade or so, however, that these two parallel projects have finally come together in what is, at best, a very volatile and tenuous partnership. In a sense, the alliance between these disciplinary siblings is informed by a mutual suspicion, wherein each discourse constantly confronts its limits and exclusions in the other. In the main, there are three areas of controversy which fracture the potential unity between postcolonialism and feminism: the debate surrounding the figure of the 'third-world woman'; the problematic history of the 'feminist-as-imperialist'; and finally, the colonialist deployment of 'feminist criteria' to bolster the appeal of the 'civilizing mission'. (Gandhi 82-83)

The most significant collision and collusion of postcolonial and feminist theory occurs around the contentious figure of the 'third-world woman'. Some feminist postcolonial theorists have cogently argued that a blinkered focus on racial politics inevitably elides the 'double colonisation' of women under imperial conditions. Such theory postulates the 'third-world woman' as victim par excellence—the forgotten casualty of both imperial ideology, and native and foreign patriarchies. While it is now impossible to ignore the feminist challenge to the gender blindness of anti-colonial nationalism, critics such as Sara Suleri are instructive in their disavowal of the much too eager 'coalition between postcolonial and feminist theories, in which each term serves to reify the potential pietism of the other' (Suleri 1992, p. 274). The imbrication of race and gender, as Suleri goes on to argue, invests the 'third-world woman' with an iconicity which is almost 'too good to be true' (1992, p. 273).

Suleri's irascible objections to the postcolonial–feminist merger require some clarification. They need to be read as a refusal to surrender the 'third-world woman' to the sentimental and often opportunistic category of 'marginality', which has come to characterise the metropolitan cult of 'oppositional criticism'. As Spivak writes, 'If there is a buzzword in cultural critique now, it is "marginality"' (Spivak 1993, 55). We now take it on trust that the consistent invocation of the marginal/subjugated positions has helped reform the aggressive canonicity of high Western culture. And yet, even as the margins thicken with political significance, there are two problems which must give pause.

First, as Spivak insists, the prescription of non-Western alterity as a tonic for the ill health of Western culture heralds the perpetration of a 'new Orientalism'. Second, the metropolitan demand for marginality is also troublingly a command which consolidates and names the non-West as interminably marginal. By way of example, we might reconsider Deleuze and Guattari's celebration of 'minor' or 'deterritorialised' discourses in their influential study, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986). In Deleuze and Guattari's revolutionary manifesto, the third world becomes a stable metaphor for the 'minor' zone of nonculture and underdevelopment. Moreover, its value inheres only in its capacity to politicize or subvert the major, that is to say, more developed, cultural formations. Once again, then, as Gayatri Spivak suggests, the margin is at the service of the centre: 'When a cultural identity is thrust upon one because the centre wants an identifiable margin, claims for marginality assure validation from the centre' (Spivak 1993, p. 55). The 'third-world woman' is arguably housed in an 'identifiable margin'. However, as critics like Suleri and Spivak insist, this accommodation is ultimately unsatisfactory.

In her combatively argued book *Woman, Native, Other*, Trinh T. Minh-ha firmly attributes the rise of the third-world woman to the 'ideological tourism' of Western liberal feminism. Trinh's book elaborates its critique through a fictionalized—and yet all too familiar—account of the paternalistic and self-congratulatory tokenism which sustains 'Special Third World Women's' readings, workshops, meetings and seminars. In every such event, Trinh argues, the veneer of cross-cultural, sisterly colloquium disguises an unpleasant ideology of separatism. Wherever she goes, the 'native woman' is required to exhibit her ineluctable

'difference' from the primary referent of Western feminism: 'It is as if everywhere we go, we become Someone's private zoo' (Trinh 1989, p. 82). This voyeuristic craving for the colourful alterity of native women seriously compromises the seemingly egalitarian politics of liberal feminism.

The consciousness of difference, identified by Trinh, sets up an implicit culturalist hierarchy wherein almost inevitably the 'native woman' suffers in contrast with her Western sibling. By claiming the dubious privilege of 'preparing the way for one's more "unfortunate" sisters', the Western feminist creates an insuperable division between 'I-who-have-made-it and You-who-cannot-make-it' (1989, p. 86). Thus, Trinh concludes, the circulation of the 'Special Third World Women's Issue', only serves to advertise the specialness of the mediating first-world woman.

In her influential article 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', Chandra Talpade Mohanty similarly discerns the play of a discursive colonialism in the 'production of the "Third World Woman" as a singular monolithic subject in some recent (Western) feminist texts' (Mohanty 196). Talpade Mohanty uses the term 'colonialism' very loosely to imply any relation of structural domination which relies upon a self-serving suppression of 'the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question' (196).

The analytic category 'third-world woman' is, thus, colonialist for two reasons—first, because its ethnocentric myopia disregards the enormous material and historical differences between 'real' third-world women; and second, because the composite 'Othering' of the 'third-world woman' becomes a self-consolidating project for Western feminism. Talpade Mohanty shows how feminists working within the social sciences invoke the narrative of 'double colonisation' principally to contrast the political immaturity of third-world women with the progressive ethos of Western feminism. Thus, the representation of the average third-world woman as 'ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domesticated, family-oriented, victimised', facilitates and privileges the self-representation of Western women 'as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and "sexualities", and the "freedom" to make their own decisions' (1994, p. 200).

To a very large extent, Trinh's and Talpade Mohanty's critiques of liberal-feminist imperialism, draw upon Said's understanding of colonial discourse as the cultural privilege of representing the subjugated 'Other'. It has been widely suggested in recent postcolonial writing that both Said and Talpade Mohanty, despite their difference of focus basically seem to be advocating the idea that the third world woman cannot represent herself and has to be represented. The 'third-world woman' can thus be seen as yet-another object of Western knowledge, simultaneously knowable and unknowing. And as Talpade Mohanty laments, the residual traces of colonialist epistemology are all too visible in:

The appropriation and codification of 'scholarship' and 'knowledge' about women in the third world by particular analytic categories employed in writings on the subject which take as their primary point of reference feminist interests which have been articulated in the US and western Europe' (Mohanty 196)

Gayatri Spivak deserves mention here for her relentless challenge to all those specious knowledge systems which seek to regulate the articulation of what she calls the 'gendered subaltern'. Although most of Spivak's scattered oeuvre touches upon the touchy politics of knowing the Other, her early essay 'French Feminism in an International Frame' (1987) is exemplary in its attention to the narcissism of the liberal-feminist investigator. In this essay, Spivak details the problematic elisions which run through Julia Kristeva's *About Chinese Women*—a text which emerged out of the sporadic French academic interest in China during the 1970s. Spivak's essay pursues Kristeva's itinerant gaze to the sun-soaked expanse of Huxian Square, where a crowd of unspeaking women picturesquely awaits the theorist's peroration.

In her characteristic style, Spivak begins to deconstruct Kristeva's confident musings and, in so doing, foregrounds the discrepancy between the visible silence of the observed Chinese women and the discursive eloquence of the observing French feminist. Spivak's exercise makes a simple point: we never hear the object(s) of Kristeva's investigation represent themselves. Yet, in the face of her mute native material, Kristeva abandons all scholarly decorum to hypothesise and generalise about China in terms of millennia, and always, as Spivak wryly observes, 'with no encroachment of archival evidence' (Spivak 1987, p. 137). Eventually, as Kristeva's prose starts to slip away from any reference to the verity of the onlooking gathering at Huxian Square, her fluency becomes an end in itself; a solipsistic confirmation of the investigator's discursive privilege. Indeed, as Spivak points out, the material and historical scene before Kristeva is only ever an occasion for self-elaboration:

Her question, in the face of those silent women, is about her own identity rather than theirs . . . This too might be characteristic of the group of thinkers to whom I have, most generally, attached her. Despite their occasional interest in touching the other of the West, of metaphysics, of capitalism, their repeated question is obsessively self-centred: if we are not what official history and philosophy say we are, who then are we (not), how are we (not)? (Spivak 137).

Spivak's incisive reading catches the authoritative knower in the act of 'epistemic violence'—or authoritarian knowing. The treatise about Chinese Women turns out to be a book about Kristeva: a text which deploys, once again, the difference of the 'third-world woman' as fodder for the Western theory. Trinh's concluding remarks on the generic third-world women's seminar are relevant here: "We did not come to hear a Third World member speak about the First(?) World. We came to listen to that voice of difference likely to bring us what we can't have and to divert us from the monotony of sameness" (Trinh 88).

The critics we have been reviewing raise significant and trenchant objections to the Western feminist investment in postcolonial matters. And yet their own critique suffers from serious limitations. Trinh, Talpade Mohanty and Spivak each idealize and essentialise the epistemological opacity of the 'real' third-world woman. By making her the bearer of meanings/experiences which are always in excess of Western analytic categories, these critics paradoxically re-invest the 'third-world woman' with the very iconicity they set out to contest. This newly reclaimed figure is now postulated as the triumphant site of anti-colonial resistance. Trinh's elaborate

prose valorizes the racial, gendered body itself as a revolutionary archive, while Spivak, somewhat feebly, urges the academic feminist to speak to the subaltern woman, to learn from her repository of lived experience. If these proposals for change are somewhat suspect, it is also worth noting that each of the critics under consideration is guilty of the sort of reversed ethnocentrism which haunts Said's totalizing critique of Orientalism. In refuting the composite and monolithic construction of 'native women,' Spivak and others unself-consciously homogenize the intentions of all Western feminists/feminisms. As it happens, there are always other stories to tell—on both sides of the fence which separates postcolonialism from feminism.

Brick Lane (2003), is a novel by Monica Ali, a diasporic writer from the South-Asian country of Bangladesh. It is a representative and exemplary piece of postcolonial-feminist writing. Its diasporic setting and the context of a multicultural London where racism in various forms is rampant makes it a postcolonial novel. At the same time, it is a feminist novel in the sense that Nazneen, a young girl from Bangladesh and now married to Chanu, another Bangladeshi immigrant in London, is the protagonist of the novel. A substantial part of the novel is also made up of letters sent to Nazneen from her younger sister Hasina who had eloped with her lover at an early age.

It is the tale of a shy, docile, uneducated woman born into the patriarchal society of Mymensingh, Bangladesh and married off to a stark stranger, Chanu—an emigrant from Bangladesh in London—according to the will of her father, Hamid. Chanu is a middle-aged man, struggling to kickstart his career in London. Post-marriage, Chanu and Nazneen settle in Tower Hamlets, a low-income housing estate in a Bangladeshi immigrant neighbourhood in London.

Running parallel to the story of Nazneen is that of her rebellious younger sister Hasina, who had run away from home with her lover. Her father had waited for her for fourteen days with a dagger to kill her, as she had sullied his social prestige by eloping. However, her tale is a saga of exploitation, rape, and repeated desertion in the patriarchal society of Bangladesh. She keeps her sister informed about her suffering by writing regular and detailed letters about her whereabouts. We also hear in one of the letters that Hasina sometimes visits her friend Monju, who was badly burnt in an acid attack by her husband.

Chanu is fat and chubby, and patronising to the extent of being fatherly, and Nazneen does not actually love him. She has romantic fantasies of ice-skating with a young man. She eventually falls in love with Karim, a man who brings her the supply of sewing material for the stitching which Nazneen does at home. Chanu suffers from what has been called in the novel the "going-home syndrome". He is unable to secure promotion on job despite being more educated than his co-workers, he becomes frustrated and irritable. He severely criticizes the racial mindset of his white superiors who deny him promotion.

In the meanwhile, Nazneen's disillusionment with Chanu is almost complete and she does not want to go back to Bangladesh, as she sees opportunities for herself in London. The opportunity that she sees is that of liberation from an unloving, aged,

and preaching husband. It is a desire for freedom from all the shackles that a traditional society puts on women. It is an urge for self-realisation. The skating scene at the end of the novel where Nazneen is seen on the skating rill in full skating gear, is emblematic of the liberation from suffocating subjugation. That she is able to stand up to Chanu and refuse his offer to go back to Bangladesh is another instance of feminist assertion. Then there is her refusal of Karim's offer of marriage despite the fact that she is tired of Chanu. She doesn't want to be again tied to another male, and sacrifice her freedom in bargain. She also attends meetings of an Islamic militant group that raises her confidence. In sum, she finally comes out emphatically of her immigrant identity, and comfortably becomes a part of her present.

Thus, we see how in different ways the central concerns of feminism, and postcolonial, diasporic identity clash, blend and overlap in the novel *Brick Lane*.

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