



Economic Globalization and Postcolonial Women: A Critical Study of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003)

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Abstract

The present literary study posits the argument that Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2003) delineates that global capitalist dicta such as the deregulation of economy, reduction in state responsibility and reliance upon private administration imposed upon the weaker economies of the postcolonial nation-states by global monetary organizations are highly detrimental to the economic status of women. As a result of these policies, governments reduce expenditure on public health, education, housing, and other such areas. Women's neglected health, poor education, low paid jobs and childbirth/care liabilities make them depend greatly on these services and are extremely distressed by these cuts. The shift of industries from global North to South to procure cheap labor has resulted in employment opportunity for southern women yet exploitation far exceeds the rosy prospects. To substantiate the claim in relation to this particular strain and motif in the novel, the theoretical concepts of feminist economics, inequitable wages and sexual exploitation, from within the theory of Postcolonial Feminism, are applied in the analysis of the fictional work. Through a scrutiny of the two central female characters and variations in their economic situation in the novel, the study tries to assess women's monetary position in relation to the global and local economic processes.

Keywords: Postcolonial Feminist Economics, Neoliberal Policies, Global Monetary Organizations, Gender-based Inequities, Sexual exploitation

Introduction

A new millennium ushers into human history and the pace of human technological advancement races, turning the world into a global village. Political systems, economies, and cultures develop into hybrid and integrated structures rather than staying fixed as isolated and insular units solely determined by national governments. The umbrella term incorporating the multiple and overlapping progression of transnational and cross-cultural amalgamation is identified as globalization.

In the 21st century, it is this phenomenon of globalization which determines the mode of survival for billions across the globe: be it the First World white majority living in the West, the colored Third World multitude residing in the postcolonial nation-states or the Diaspora communities living at the crossroads of the two. Economy, as Karl Marx historically defined in *Das Capital*, forms the founding configuration which decides the superstructure i.e., the religious, cultural, and aesthetic goals to be pursued by a community. Economic globalization, therefore,



crafts heart of the globalization experience and stands out as the most momentous and crucial issue pertaining to it.

In *Rerouting the Postcolonial*, Spencer phrases the postcolonial response to the so-called intersection of the national and the global as wary and skeptical (37-40). Majority of Postcolonial theorists look upon the assimilation of national/local economies with the international trade markets and the laws/ regulations formulated by global economic organizations to govern the integration as an asymmetrical and exploitative imperialist maneuver. They regard it as a machine churning out surplus for the Western countries while distributing poverty, debts and dependence to the former colonized regions now forming the backward and impoverished states of the world (Slater; Tikly; Went; Beck). Most of Postcolonial feminist theorists also offer a comprehensive critique of economic globalization affirming it as a *modus operandi* causing colossal damage to the economic status of postcolonial third world women (Jaggar; Williams; Maira; Loomba). A few of the concerns they raise are linked to the exploitation of colored women as cheap labor, lack of public service benefits for them and sexual abuse at the hands of organizers of multinational firms. There are, however, some theorists who call anti-globalization rhetoric as an unfair ruckus and view it as a liberating force for Third World women oppressed both by local patriarchal, hegemonic economy as well as by the inequitable national policies hardly safeguarding their welfare.

Monica Ali is a contemporary Bangladeshi fiction writer settled in London. *Brick Lane*, her first novel published in 2003, was nominated for the Booker Prize and is worldwide acclaimed as a remarkably rich text, largely depicting the ethnic life of Bangladeshi immigrants living around Brick Lane, a street in the centre of Bangladeshi residential community in London. Part of the novel delineates characters and lives rooted in Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh. A critical study of her female characters and their economic condition as they interact with the globalized economy both within the national framework and the Diaspora community makes a relevant case to analyze the positive or adverse impact of economic globalization on the lives of postcolonial Third world women.

Thesis Statement

Literature created in the postmodern globalized era displays a particularly ardent sensibility and concern towards globalization, its various dimensions and its impact on diverse regions, ethnicities, and classes. Postcolonial female literary writers of the 21st century display a preoccupation with both the subjectivity and objectification of Third World women whether it is cultural, political or economic. The present study aims at analyzing how postcolonial literature by female writers strives to highlight the financial dilemmas as well as the economic liberation of the postcolonial women placed in specific backdrops. Through a scrutiny of the two central female characters and variations in their economic situation in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, the study tries to assess how an investigation of character sketches leads to an understanding of women's monetary position in relation to the global and local economic processes.

Research Questions

The present study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the major advantages and disadvantages brought by economic globalization to the postcolonial Third World women?
2. How does economic globalization affect women of lower class located in the metropolitan area of a South Asian postcolonial nation-state?



3. In what ways are patriarchal society, national economic policy and global economic networks responsible for the poverty and sexual exploitation of lower-class women?
4. What are the predicaments and privileges of Third world lower middle-class women residing in the Western metropolises as members of Asian Diaspora?

Significance of the Study

The study seeks to investigate how fiction produced by postcolonial female writers is an aesthetic embodiment of the politico-economic struggle carried out by postcolonial masses (especially women) against the discriminatory systems of Patriarchy, Classism, and Imperialism. It endeavors to discuss and debate the Postcolonial critique of economic globalization in relation to the lives of women in contemporary postcolonial fiction. This argument, depiction and making connections is not only central to bringing to light the oppression of locally situated women and the Diaspora ones by the economic nexus of the local and the global but also to give voice to the liberty and equal opportunity granted by the same process. Such research in literary studies, in this case Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, brings to the fore the text's engagement with the nuances of female economy in a variety of contexts. It is also decisive in the origination of strategies about how to cut short the perpetuation of oppression and encourage support of the emancipation through awareness.

Research Methodology

In this qualitative research, a close textual analysis of *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali will be carried out to figure out the nature of women's economic oppression and liberation in the work. The framework of analysis will be evolved based on the post colonialist theoretical critique of economic globalization and its canons of Third World women's exploitation, marginalization and sexualization by the mechanism. It will analyze central female characters in the novel and the shift in their economic status as the story unfolds. Through a study of the women's struggle and liberation depicted in the novel, issues of subjugation/exploitation and empowerment will be explicated.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial discourse has largely been critical of the current phenomenon of globalization; in particular of the economic aspect of it. Loomba and Slater explicate that globalization is the latest disguise taken up by the old monster of imperialism and colonization which took birth around the seventeenth century. Loomba argues that the colonization of the formerly colonized and the present Third world countries by the First World/West persists in the form of the cultural, economic, and political disparities between the two (3-7). The postcolonial world is past physical occupation yet its apparently sovereign states are neocolonial since they are now indirectly manipulated and exploited by the West and the newly emergent American empire.

Neoliberal capitalist economic globalization is regarded as the neo-imperial hegemonic apparatus employed to keep the postcolonial third world impoverished and subjugated (Slater 651-64). Tikly (151-171) asserts that global economic organizations which direct and dictate national markets are controlled by West/America. According to both Slater and Tikly, these institutions also work in collaboration with the postcolonial ruling elite who, in order to secure kickbacks for themselves; let the neo-imperial economic interventions in. When the national governments are coerced by IMF, World Bank and WTO on policies of local importance like state expenditure on



public services, trade policies, rate of currency exchange etc, national/local exigencies are discounted, and the economic condition of the postcolonial masses deteriorates. They must move in the vicious circle of debt taken by their rulers from the officers of the empire and thus the gap between the rich and the poor widens.

Theorists like Beck, Went, Chen, and Ashcroft emphasize that the postcolonial nation-state monetary policies must be granted due role and authority against the global financial firms so that the inequities caused at the local level can be dealt with efficiently. Ashcroft stresses that global capitalism is susceptible to fiscal crashes and in the 2008 backdrop of “corporations dissolving and the share market plummeting”, it were the national governments’ policies that were resorted to and relied upon for economic rescue (73). Kinnvall in her article “Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity and the Search for Ontological Security” discusses that as capitalist globalization aggravates the gap between haves and have nots and minimizes the nation-state’s grip, economic affairs become highly unpredictable and unstable for the masses. Unregulated neo-liberal capitalism in the form of excessive privatization and competitiveness leads to adverse impact on developing economies and results in loss of employment security for the middle and lower classes. It is this economic vulnerability, which is responsible for the extreme, erratic and often violent behavior of “existentially uncertain” and “ontologically insecure” Third World masses (741-44).

The Postcolonial feminist and economist theorists have been critical of the impact of economic globalization on postcolonial women. In this context the women referred to, belong mostly to middle and lower class since the upper class women are comparatively less affected and broadly benefit from economic globalization as their male counterparts do. Nelson in her article “Rethinking Development and Globalization: Insights from Feminist Economics” writes that the structural adjustment policies imposed upon the weaker economies of the postcolonial nation-states by global economic networks are highly detrimental to the economic status of women. As a result of these policies, governments have to reduce expenditure on public health, education, housing, and other such areas. Women’s neglected health, poor education, low paid jobs and childbirth/care liabilities make them depend greatly on these services and are extremely distressed by these cuts. For example, lack of public health service in Third World countries leads to increased mortality rate in women. Similarly in case of no state support in the education sector, the number of girls from lower and lower –middle class is at the top of school dropouts. In an economic scenario dominated by powerful white nations, elite investors and global firms, the interest, participation, or influence of the Third World women is nowhere to be seen.

Williams (97-105) raises the question of the privatization dilemma of economic globalization. Transnational economic firms insist upon the privatization of various economic sectors e.g., the energy sector to avoid the strict regulatory measures endorsed by the state. Global organizations thrive upon this situation where their surplus multiplies due to lack of state interference. Deregulation of the industries, renunciation of state responsibility and reliance upon private administration led to multiple factors causing deterioration in women’s status in relation to the workplace. The manipulation of work hours, working environment and salaries may be prescribed by private owners in which the exploitation of female labor increases. The shift of industries from global North to South to procure cheap labor has resulted in employment opportunity for southern women yet exploitation far exceeds the rosy prospects. Women form a



proletariat class of their own in the underdeveloped southern countries, particularly in Asia, who are compelled to work under oppressive inhuman conditions for minimum wages. The postcolonial governments add insult to the injury by presenting stereotypical images of docile women workers to allure the multinational corporations' investment. Women's sessility due to their familial duties makes it difficult for them to avoid maltreatment by moving to other places or finding better jobs.

Tong elucidates (226-228) how postcolonial feminist Maria Mies theorizes that women in third world are laborers both low-priced and employed for longer working hours than men. She also deliberates over Audre Lorde's discussion of the economic state of black women in America who, because of their ethnic/national marginalization, are paid low salaries and drawn into prostitution. Jaggar elucidates how brown and black i.e. Asian and African Diaspora women living in the West are influenced negatively by economic inequities resulting from free trade, reallocation of industries from North to South and the widening gap between the elite and the remaining sections of society (298-314). She states that the only jobs left for women of color residing in United States are: "McJobs, casual, contingency or part-time positions (often in the service sector), which are typically low-paid and lack health or retirement benefits" (305). Although unemployment and low hourly wages may take their toll on all workers, the ones invariably victimized are the colored women.

Jaggar also explicates that neoliberal capitalist globalization has led to an increased sexualization of lower and lower middle class Third world women. This sexual exploitation is executed at manifold levels. Within the industries run by multinational corporations, no regulatory measures concerning ethics apply and therefore poor laborer women are sexually harassed by managers and executives in charge. Third World women are drawn into prostitution and sex-services i.e., are cheaply hired for serving laborers on large agricultural estates owned by filthy rich capitalists, for serving the bosses of international companies and around military camps etc. Capitalist globalization also thrives on the profit gained from billion-dollar pornography business.

A counter argument to the above-mentioned school of thought is put forward by theorists like Gray, Kittilson and Sandholtz. They argue that the economic status of Third World women is ameliorated by the economic intersecting of the world. It has brought openings, equal prospects and new resources for marginalized postcolonial women (293-333). Ping is also of the opinion that increased transnational economic exchange has brought individuality, autonomy and economic independence for women which was hardly possible within the traditional orthodox social systems and patriarchal state projects (1278-1281).

Discussion

Haseena is the one of the two central female characters and sister to the protagonist Nazneen in *Brick Lane*. Her parents live in a village called Gauripur and that's where she is brought up with her sister. She is a lively and pretty young girl who falls in love with a boy and thinking their love marriage to be impossible in the face of conservative rural customs, runs away to Dhaka with her lover. Her romantic dreams of a happy-ever-after soon dash to the ground and after going through a few months of tormented married existence, she decides to abandon her husband and seek a new life. She flees to Dhaka and finds job in a garment factory where a great number of lower-class women work. The garment factory where women work is looked down upon by the patriarchal society which does not approve of women working outside the house. Haseena



expresses the general social response in such terms: “How easy to call the garment girls. Zainab says one hundred and fifty girls in one factory getting pregnant. This is kind of thing people say. Who going to stop them?” (126). The garment factory sounds synonymous with a brothel for chauvinist men who don't let their wives' work.

Haseena is given quarters to live in on cheap rate and provided with other facilities, yet these are not the privileges of employment. The feudal Lord called Chaudry, who is the owner of the factory where she works, visits her frequently and soon exploits her sexually. The main clerk in the factory called Abdul comes to her rescue and guarantees support when the factory women boycott her due to rumors about her relationship with Chaudry. The clerk also ends up maneuvering to make her sleep with him. However, her ill-treatment does not end with sexual abuse. When the duo comes to know that the cat of their sexual misuse concerning Haseena is out of the bag, they plot to turn her out of job. The key apprehension is capitalist; they fear that other female workers may be stopped by their families from working in the factory. Thus, the economic and sexual maltreatment of a lower class Third World woman is thus consummated at the hands of a feudal private industry owner and his administrative manager.

If the owner and the administrators exploit her sexually and monetarily, another cog in the capitalist wheel i.e., the fellow laborer does not lag behind. Hussain, a drudge in the jute factory, at first sympathizes with her and tries to help in minor tasks. The man abuses her sexually and finally, regarding it as a profitable business, turns into a pimp and contrives to offer her as a prostitute or “floating girl” to men with money. The man suggests to her to make money out of prostitution while youth and vigor are there with her.

Inside the garment factory, where Haseena works with other women, they are allotted the complicated and more time-consuming jobs like sewing and embroidering while men comprise the administrative body as well as take up the easy jobs of cutting cloths and making patterns. Supply Orders from Japan bring money for the capitalist owners but only overtime for the female workers. Women's duties in the domestic sphere, care taking responsibilities and particularly the taxing duties of motherhood are not given any consideration by the local feudal owner. The overtime goes unpaid or meagerly paid for. For the toughest job of brick breaking, women are preferred workers because they settle for cheap wages in order to meet the needs of their children who often assist them in breaking bricks.

Out of jobs and out of favor with the second husband, Haseena ends up at a destitute hostel for prostitutes. The house is set up by Brother Andrew from Canada. An elite class woman Lovely and her industrialist husband James recover her from the house to employ her as a maid in their house. In that position, she must do the multiple duties of washing and cleaning jobs as well as the work of an ayah or governess for a meager sum. At night she sleeps on the floor in the baby daughter's room and has to tend all night to her. Her physical and economic exploitation under oppressive working conditions in the household of an industrialist continues until she, once again, runs away for another life.

Nazneen is sister to Haseena and the protagonist of the story. At the age of eighteen, she is married off by her parents to a much older man Chanu, a lower middle-class man with a low-paid clerical job, living in London. Nazneen comes to live in Tower Hamlets among the Bengali Diaspora community the centre of which is the street called Brick Lane. At first, the only English words she succeeds in speaking are Sorry and Thank You but soon adapts better. Once when she



roams around London on her own, she feels pleased when she conveys herself in English to a white man. When she thinks about her village Gauripur back in Bangladesh, all that comes to her mind is a hard life. The thought of a life without gas stove and flushing toilet sounds annoying and tiresome to her now. She feels she is better off here so that even when her husband Chanu goes out of job, the British government provides free primary education, a place to live in without rent and allowance for the unemployed.

When Nazneen's husband quits his job, Nazneen starts supporting her family by getting sewing, hemming, buttoning, zipping and all sorts of stitching and mending jobs. She does not go outside the house to do the jobs; rather work is brought home to her by her husband a middleman called Karim belonging to the same community. The restriction is not imposed upon her by any external economic factor but by her own patriarchal husband. The money earned thus is meager yet liberates her as an individual and helps the family go on. She manages to send some financial assistance to Haseena in Dhaka as well. She saves a part for going-back-home project. Shahana, her eldest daughter fulfills her cravings for luxury items through her the same income. What Nazneen could earn if she could pursue the job outside the house i.e. if she was not inhibited by patriarchal and religious norms, is left for the reader to guess.

Out of same income through private sewing projects, she even arranges to pay back the amount borrowed by her husband from the usurer woman Mrs. Salam. It is her skill with the sewing machine and the designing of garments that gives her the courage and economic security to stay behind in England when her husband Chanu leaves for Bangladesh. Razia, her friend from the Bengali community, has already set up her garment business and has been going all over places like Southall, Wembley etc. to get orders for dresses. Razia opts her way out of the sweat shop and chooses to work on her own, experimenting with all sorts of private supply demands and designing both Eastern and Western stuff for the free market. Nazneen joins her and manages to raise her daughters, keep the house, and keep up sending to Haseena through her free individual enterprise in the neoliberal capitalist marketplace. At the end of the novel, her daughters grant her lifelong wish by taking her to an Ice Rink. The jubilation of the girls on this summing up occasion and Nazneen's dream of freedom coming true makes Razia concludes that "This is England, you can do whatever you like" (409). The closing remark is highly significant as it reflects upon the fair opportunity and liberty meted out to individuals by the global economy unhindered by patriarchal domination, state neglect or sexual exploitation.

Conclusion

The postcolonial feminist critique of economic globalization was applied to Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. The prominent features of global economy i.e. exploitation of Third World women as cheap labor, reduction in provision of public services by the state, unregulated privatization and sexualization were particularly analyzed in relation to the two central female characters Haseena and Nazneen. The location and situation of the two postcolonial women was altogether dissimilar since Haseena lived in Dhaka, Bangladesh and Nazneen made a member of the Bangladeshi Diaspora residing in London. Haseena fell from a lower middle class to the lowest strata while Nazneen stayed the same.

Haseena's monetary and sexual exploitation in the garment factory at Dhaka has been a consequence less of interaction with global companies like the corporation from Japan giving



supply demands for garments. It is the local private owner Chaudry and later his manager clerk who first sexually abuse Haseena and then contrive to turn her out of job. The local fellow worker Hussain drawing her into prostitution is also a product of the national/local patriarchal manipulative system. However, two factors pertaining to and supported by economic globalization can be held responsible for the exploitation and sexualization of Haseena: the unqualified privatization of local industry and the lack of state authority/regulation over the financial and ethical environment of the private sector.

In Nazneen's Diasporic situation, global economy proves economically liberating for her. Through private deals and offers for sewing, she succeeds in supporting her family. At the end of the novel, when her husband leaves her alone in London, she acts as an autonomous, liberated, and independent individual by becoming part of the neo-liberal capitalist economy. The global economy gives her financial support and enables her to exercise her agency and subjectivity.

The critique of inequities caused by economic globalization holds value and validity in certain respects linked with the economic scenario within the postcolonial nation-state like the private sector. However, the viewpoint of regarding economic globalization as a complete monster does not hold ground in every situation. In the case of Bangladeshi Diaspora woman Nazneen, global economy and its major facets prove to be ameliorating and liberating.

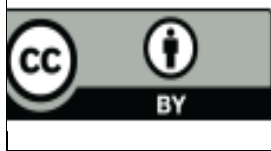
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