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Cultural Appropriation A Neo-colonial Reading of Monica Ali's Brick Lane

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive neo-colonial investigation of a 2003 novel by Monica Ali titled *Brick Lane*, with a focus on the academic controversy in relation to its representation of a Bangladeshi diaspora in London and the subsequent cultural appropriation accusations. Using an integrative theoretical framework that opens up the micro-level ethics of cultural representation to the macro-level structural conditions of the global literary market, the analysis questions how decisions made in a narrative, such as the passivity of Nazneen, the Going Home Syndrome in Chanu, and the exoticisation of the immigrant experience, can be framed as a mode of a neo-postcolonial apparatus. Using the idea of the postcolonial exotic, proposed by Graham Huggan, and the concept of symbolic domination, introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, the paper will contend that despite the subtle portrayal of identity and hybridity, the novel nonetheless plays a part in the commodification of cultural difference to a Western audience. It concludes that the controversy around the topic of the authorial authenticity of the case of *Brick Lane* is much deeper than the question of authorial authenticity and can be interpreted as a critical point of departure towards the interpretation of the complex power relations of contemporary diasporic literature in the globalised and post-imperial environment. Keywords: Cultural Appropriation, Neo-colonialism, symbolic domination, Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*.

الخلاصة :

تقدم هذه الورقة بحثاً استعماريًا جديدًا شاملًا لرواية "بريك لين" للكاتبة مونیکا علي، الصادرة عام ٢٠٠٣، مع التركيز على الجدل الأكاديمي الدائر حول تصويرها للجالية البنغلاديشية في لندن، وما تلاه من اتهامات بالاستيلاء الثقافي. وباستخدام إطار نظري تكاملي يربط بين أخلاقيات التمثيل الثقافي على المستوى الجزئي والظروف الهيكلية على المستوى الكلي لسوق الأدب العالمي، يتساءل التحليل عن كيفية تأطير القرارات المتخذة في السرد، مثل سلبية نازنين، ومتلازمة العودة إلى الوطن لدى شانو، وتصوير تجربة المهاجرين بصورة غريبة، كنمط من أنماط جهاز ما بعد الاستعمار الجديد. وبلاستناد إلى فكرة "الغريب ما بعد الاستعماري" التي طرحها غراهام هوغان، ومفهوم الهيمنة الرمزية الذي قدمه بيير بورديو، ستجادل الورقة بأنه على الرغم من التصوير الدقيق للهوية والتجهين، فإن الرواية مع ذلك تساهم في تسليع الاختلاف الثقافي لدى الجمهور الغربي. ويخلص إلى أن الجدل الدائر حول موضوع أصالة المؤلف في قضية بريك لين أعمق بكثير من مسألة أصالة المؤلف ويمكن تفسيره كنقطة انطلاق حاسمة نحو تفسير علاقات القوة المعقدة في أدب الشتات المعاصر في البيئة المعولمة وما بعد الإمبريالية.

I. Introduction

Monica Ali, in her novel, *Brick Lane* (2003), is placed in a central position in contemporary British migrant literature by following the path taken by Nazneen, a young Bangladeshi woman who comes to the East End in London as a result of arranged marriages. The commercial success and acclaim of the novel came quickly, followed by a backlash, especially with the members of the local Bangladeshi people of the Brick Lane area who felt it was misrepresenting and stereotyping them. This scandal makes the piece of fiction more than fiction itself, a vital case study in exploring the politics of representation, and thus makes it a perfect object, using which to view the overlapping theoretical constructions of cultural appropriation and neo-colonialism. In the literary

production, cultural appropriation is the act of one of a dominant or privileged group adopting, using, or making a profit on the cultural forms, themes, or experiences of a marginalised group, often with a lack of the required depth of understanding or respect to the society that forms the source community. Neo-colonialism, on the other hand, is a theoretical approach, which goes beyond the historical interests of colonialism to the analysis of the manifestation of imperial power relations in the modern globalised environment. This frame predicts the involvement of economic dependency, global media and cultural markets in maintaining the forms of symbolic domination. The theme of discord between the prerogative of the author to create aesthetically and the ethical requirement to portray a marginalised community responsibly lies at the core of the research problem that is examined below, especially when the narrative product of this is adhered to and hailed by the dominant Western consumption audience. The current paper aims to provide a consistent model that would connect certain cultural appropriation allegations under the name of *Brick Lane* to the structural setting of the world literary market, which is essentially neo-postcolonial.

II. Literature Review

This literature review critically analyses scholarly literature applicable to the current investigation by reviewing three related strands of work: first, theoretical and ethical discussions of the issue of cultural appropriation, second, neo-colonial and globalization-oriented frameworks, and third, the literary criticism of Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane*. Theorists have addressed issues of representation, identity, hybridity, and stereotyping, as well as cultural ownership, in the postcolonial and global contexts. These studies, though having some useful information on the politics of cultural representation, are mostly disconnected across the field of discipline. Through the chronological and thematic structure of the literature review, the aims and objectives, and findings of every study are assessed to create a critical framework of a neo-colonial analysis of cultural appropriation in the novel *Brick Lane*. An article bearing the title of *Other People Fiction: Cultural Appropriation, Cultural integrity and International Media Strategies* (Newcomb, 1997) dwells upon the issue of cultural appropriation in the international media industries. The research explores the processes of the appropriation of marginalized discourses by the cultures that hold superiority in the circumstances of globalization. Its results show that cultural appropriation is often a cultural control tactic that disregards cultural integrity and strengthens global power structures. A different research, *Reclaiming Native Stories: Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Rights* by Tsosie in 2002 that discusses the issue of cultural appropriation within a legal and ethical framework. It contends to cultural sovereignty and the right to tell their own stories, and that, in fact, appropriation is a continuation of colonial dispossession, especially in the situation where indigenous peoples are not allowed to represent themselves. The study by Young and Haley, *Nothing Comes from Nowhere: Reflections on Cultural Appropriation* (2009) criticizes the ethics of cultural appropriation. It tries to differentiate between cultural exchange and exploitative representation, and the findings indicate that appropriation is ethically problematic when the asymmetrical power relations enable a time and place where the dominant cultures can exploit the marginalized identities to make profits. In the same year, 2023, another study by Al-shammmary Craig Thompson, entitled, *Cultural Appropriation in the Graphic Novel Habibi* that focus on the issue of appropriation in the form of the visual narrative. It demonstrates how the aesthetic borrowing can continue the Orientalist stereotypes, and it also points out to the commoditization of cultures in the Western artistic production. Two years after, in 2023 to be specific, Elliott in his *Black Culture and Appropriation in the American Novel*, examines the literature on the Black culture in American fiction published after 1960. It shows how appropriation continues to take place in the creation of literature; it shows that the aspect of appropriation tends to masquerade as empathy or embrace before re-creating hierarchies of race. In regards to neo-colonialism, Allen in 2005, made a study titled *Reassessing the internal (neo) colonialism theory* to argues that there is a sort of internal domination that is experienced by the marginalized racial and ethnic groups and it resembles the classical colonial relations. With a revival of colonialism inside, the study brings into the limelight the issue of economic exploitation, political exclusion, and cultural subordination existing within so-called independent and democratic societies. This theory is especially beneficial in the analysis of the neo-colonial logic employed on the international and local levels. Faleiro (2012), in *Colonialism, Neo-colonialism and beyond*, provides a more generalized theoretical analysis by following the path of development of colonialism into neo-colonialism and further, to the present state. The paper emphasizes the fact that neo-colonialism operates under subtle forms of influence like cultural, ideological control as well as economic globalization instead of direct political control. Faleiro also stresses that today the world order recreates the colonial patterns in the name of development and modernization thus, strengthening the unbalanced power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South. While Udegbumam in 2020 in

his study *Neo-colonialism and Africa's development: A critical review*, highlights its long-term effects on the political, economic and social organization of post-colonial societies. The author presents an in-depth critique of neo-colonialism in Africa, stating that it is important to remember that even after formal independence, African countries are bound by foreign economic commitments and asymmetric world powers. Udegbumam says that international financial institutions, foreign aid and multinational companies are some of the institutions that promote underdevelopment because they influence domestic policies in a manner which benefits former colonial powers. This viewpoint presents neo-colonialism as an extension of colonial domination as a matter of structure and not a stage of history. In the case of the novel, *Brick Lane*, it was highly split, with issues concerning its authenticity and the legitimacy of the author being the main ones. On the one hand, the novel was acclaimed by its personalised, compassionate depiction of the inner world of Nazneen and her silent and slow process of self-discovery. Critics and members of the community questioned on the other hand, the authority of Monica Ali to represent the Sylheti immigrant experience since she is of middle-class status and raised in an external and wider world as compared to the close, insular world of the Brick Lane community. The article of Hiddlestons, *Unveiling the Immigrant in Monica Ali Brick Lane* (2005), examines the ability of the article to present the identity of the immigrants in *Brick Lane*. It also discusses the issue of visibility and invisibility in cultural narrative, and it is concluded that the novel balances the issue of exposure and concealment, as the issues of representation of the immigrant Other are strained. Kral in his research, *Shaky Ground and New Territorialities* (2007), draws the comparison between the study of *Brick Lane* and *The Namesake*. It examines the diasporic instability and belongingness, which indicates that migrant identities are not determined by the fixed national identities, it is determined by the unstable cultural territories. The article *The Multicultural Bildungsroman: Stereotypes in Brick Lane*, 2008 by Perfect, discusses the novel as a multicultural Bildungsroman. It is an attempt to examine the continuation of stereotypes and it turns out that the novel attempts to break some of the clichés, yet, conversely, repeats parts of them, which is why an issue of cultural appropriation and narrative authority arises. Lastly, Yousef, in the article, *Culture Identity in Brick Lane: A Bhabhaian Perspective* (2019), employs the theories of hybridity and the third space by Homi Bhabha. It discusses the issue of cultural identity construction, the conclusion being that, despite being reflecting of ambivalent hybridity, it does not entirely escape the dominant frames of representation. The recent neo-colonial research of migrant literature has shifted the critical focus onto the negotiation of identity, which entails the complex issues of cultural encounter as entailed by the complex economic and cultural networks across the world. Despite these advances, there remains a gap in the literature: the lack of a single theoretical framework that is explicitly correlational of the ethical aspects of cultural appropriation, that is, the modalities and mechanisms of representation, with the structural, market-driven dynamics of neo-postcolonialism, including the motives and benefactors of the production and consumption of such works. In the current paper, the given gap was attempted to be bridged by presenting how the charges of cultural appropriation against the author and her novel, *Brick Lane*, can be interpreted as a medical outcome of the novel itself being caught up within the neo-colonial literary economy.

III. Theoretical Framework: Neo-colonialism and Cultural Appropriation

The theoretical approach to the critical analysis of 2003 Monica Ali novel, titled *Brick Lane*, is the one that requires a theoretical lens that will allow one to cover the power relations that form the immigrant experience in the former imperial metropole in a multifaceted, stratified form. This paper presents a neocolonial interpretation of the message, suggesting that the cultural exchanges depicted in the text, particularly between the Bangladeshi diaspora and the East End of London, can be most effectively understood through the lens of twin neocolonialism and cultural appropriation. In this context, cultural appropriation is not a simple social faux pas, but a direct means of culture. This cultural process establishes the exercise of neocolonial power and its upkeep. The classical colonialism, which entailed the "Direct political, military, and economic control of a territory and its people, was the defining global structure from the sixteenth century until the mid-twentieth century". This system was based on an open mining of resources and labor which was imposed by a distinct hierarchy of race and civilisation. Nevertheless, it was the wave of decolonization movements after the Second World War that caused the formal political liberation of former colonies. This change, however, did not mark the end of imperial domination, but its transformation into a more subtle and permanent form of domination: neocolonialism. Neocolonialism as the phrase was coined by the first president of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah (1965), "where the former colonial power, or a new dominant global power, maintains economic, political, and cultural influence over formally independent nations" (p.2). Canli (2023), notes that despite the official abolishment of colonialism, the former colonising states "still strive to pursue their exploitive desires under various guises" (3, p. 5). The fundamental difference

is the change of direct rule to the use of indirect influence. The chains of empire are replaced “by invisible bonds of economic dependency, such as debt bondage, unequal trade agreements, and the manipulation of global financial institutions”(Canli ,2023,p.9).Most importantly, the cultural contingent of neocolonialism or the case commonly called cultural imperialism/cultural hegemony is the most widespread aspect of neocolonialism. This would involve the “imposition of the former colonizer’s culture, values, and worldview as the universal standard of modernity and progress” (Canli ,2023,p.9).This cultural superiority breeds disenfranchisement and undermining of the native cultures thus establishing an internalized neocolonial state where the former colonized elite as well as the diaspora increasingly undermine themselves. Therefore, the neocolonial project does not just carry out the manipulation of the resource; it functions to control the identity and own sense to the once colonized. The very fact that the Bangladeshi community is present in the city of London represents a direct effect of this colonial heritage as such that places them in the center of a long-standing neocolonial conflict.Cultural appropriation has been described as the “adoption of elements of a minority culture by members of the dominant culture, specifically when this adoption occurs across a significant power differential” (Nkrumah, 1965). It refers to the situation when the structure of a powerful group takes symbols, practices, an art form, or tradition of a marginalized group without any knowledge, respect or recognition of their original context, meaning or cultural value .This idea cannot be discussed without being closely connected to the dynamics of power that the colonialism created and continue to serve under neocolonialism. As a dominant group takes control of a cultural aspect, it usually removes that cultural aspect of its sacred/historical connotation, commodifies it, and makes a profit, even though the original creators are pushed to the periphery or sometimes even face discrimination due to practicing their traditions . It is a continuation of colonial logic of extraction and exploitation but in cultural sphere :Cultural appropriation is the adoption of certain language, behavior, clothing, or tradition belonging to a minority culture or social group by a dominant group without the permission of the minority group.(Rogers,2006,p.9)The lack of consent and the power imbalance are highlighted in this definition. In the neocolonial set-up, the dominant group, the British society, has the power to establish, appropriately, and dispose of the cultural aspect of the immigrant group, Bangladeshi diaspora, thus turning their culture into a trendy item or a convenient stereotype. Appropriation type of acts are often justified in terms of either appreciation or multiculturalism, but it rarely “serves to deliver any real benefits or honor to the originating community”(Hooks,1992,p.106).The commodified gazes on the Other are a salient expression of the cultural appropriation context in the neocolonial context. This involves appropriating cultural symbols- say, traditional clothing, food or religious icons and then rebranding them as a commercial commodity to be consumed by the mainstream culture. In these exchanges, the cultural artefact is detached at its sociocultural and historical context, becoming a shallow fad that could be worn and thrown away whichever one wishes. This commodification strengthens the neocolonialist economic order where the cultural production of marginalised groups is used to make a profit and amuse the metropole. The exotic is made consumable, and the power relation of the dominant culture as a consumer and the marginalised culture as object is further perpetuated.

IV. Analysis: Textual Evidence of Neo-colonial Dynamics

The author Monica Ali was born in Dhaka, East Pakistan in 1967 and is one of the most prominent contemporary British writers. Ali grew up in Bolton, near Manchester, following the move of her family to England when she was three years old and she was later to study Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Wadham College, Oxford University . It is this intersection of two cultural and educational experiences that makes up a critical base to understanding her oeuvre that regularly grapples with the issues of identity, immigration, and the Asian experience in Britain. Although her early achievements were widely-read, they put her in the middle of a controversy linked to the “burden of representation”(The Guardian ,2003), in which the British-Bangladeshi community blamed her in their view as depicting their community in a negative and simplistic manner. This scuffle highlights the neocolonial conflicts of power that surround the narration and presentation of the minority experiences.*Brick Lane*, (2003) tells an account of how a young Bangladeshi woman named Nazneen relocated to London at the age of eighteen to get arranged marries to Chanu, who is a man significantly older than her and lives in Brick Lane, the center of the Bangladeshi community in East London. The first encounter that can be described as the sense of absolute isolation and invisibility is also the feeling that Nazneen experiences, a feeling that can be viewed as the personal psychological disposition and comment on the inability of the host society to recognize the immigrant as a complex human being. This invisibility is a kind of cultural appropriation in that it deprives an individual of agency and complexity and replaces it with a simplified, two-dimensional stereotype that the dominant culture can easily process and ignore . The contents of the internal monologue of Nazneen is

the summary of this neocolonial gaze: Nazneen, hobbling and halting, began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination. A leafshake of fear—or was it excitement?—passed through her legs. But they were not aware of her. In the next instant she knew it. They could not see her any more than she could see God. They knew that she existed (just as she knew that He existed) but unless she did something, waved a gun, halted the traffic, they would not see her. She enjoyed this thought. (Ali, 2003, p. 40) Those who advocate the idea of appropriation state that the image is perpetuated as the image of the submissive Muslim woman, which is a highly marketable visual to a Western audience that needs to be reassured of their own cultural superiority (Perfect, 2008, p. 23). Besides, the first fatalism, which is the belief that fate has to be accepted with apathy, is a cultural aspect which is often exploited and misconstrued by the Western gaze of Nazneen. The mainstream culture tends to subordinate the complicated spiritual aspect of kismet to no ambition or agency, therefore, legitimising the marginalised status of the immigrant (Harvey, 2003). Nazneen knows that being happy would be considered a negative is a reflection of the cultural construct of the marginalised ensuring she stays in a suffering or resigned state to the usurped story of the tragic, helpless immigrant. Her subsequent shift to self-determination is a denial of this neocolonial cultural script. The commodified hybridity is strongly expressed in the narration about the connection between Nazneen and Chanu: How had she made him? She did not know. She had patched him together, working in the dark. She had made a quilt out of pieces of silk, scraps of velvet, and now that she held it up to the light the stitches showed up large and crude, and they cut across everything. (Ali, 2003, p. 382) The quilt is the manufactured, hybrid nature of the immigrant in the metropole. The stitches appeared huge and coarse when placed under the light, that is, when subjected to the eyes of the dominant culture. This quote implies that in its cultural appropriation, the dominant culture sees only the surface, fragmented bits of the immigrant identity without recognizing the laborious, intricate nature of its construction (Tomlinson, 1991). This selective consumption is demonstrated by the neocolonial urge to consume the beautiful 'silk and velvet' exoticized elements -and to discard the crude stitches showing the struggle and hybridity as a reality. The least promising aspect of the portrayal of the novel is the character of Chanu, the husband of Nazneen, who is depicted as a tragicomic character: an intellectual dreamer who quotes Shakespeare permanently and creates some grand, frequently absurd, plans, but is completely unable to take care of his family and cope with the realities of British life. This stereotype of Chanu as an unsuccessful intellectual and an inefficient immigrant man is an example of simplification that drives the claims of appropriation (Perfect, 2008, p. 22). The novel runs the risk of turning the multifaceted cultural trauma into a palatable, even near comedy, to the reader in the West. The lament written by Chanu is a scathing indictment of the neocolonial optimism of upward mobility and the British Dream : I don't know, Shahana. Sometimes I look back and I am shocked. Every day of my life I have prepared for success, worked for it, waited for it, and you don't notice how the days pass until nearly a lifetime has finished. Then it hits you—the thing you have been waiting for has already gone by. And it was going in the other direction. It's like I've been waiting on the wrong side of the road for a bus that was already full. (Ali, 2003, p. 265) Chanu had primed himself to be a success by learning and buying the language, education and manners of the colonialist power as he had faith in the meritocratic narrative. When he realizes that the bus was full already, he reveals the one-sidedness of the neocolonial system. This system had stolen his labour and his brain and his belief in the Western model and then failed to reward him with that pledged reward. This highlights the importance of the neocolonial state cultural hijacking of the hopes of the marginalised through the illusion of opportunity to sustain domination and blame systemic failure on the individual inadequacy. Moreover, the analysis of the social hierarchy developed by Chanu shows the manipulation of the system that has to assure the status quo: You see," he said, a frequent opener although often she did not see, "it 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, p. 24) This quote proves that the white underclass is culturally colonized by the neocolonial system to act as a buffer- a group of people whose sense of superiority in regards to race is kept alive by the presence of one group that is seen as inferior . Such an arrangement discourages solidarity and makes sure that the Bangladeshi population stays in its rightful spot at the bottom to keep on with the cultural as well as economic exploitation that marks the neocolonialism of it To sum up, *Brick Lane* is a critical text of investigating the challenges to representation in the diasporic literature. The process of submission to self-determination followed by Naszeen is an illustration of the rejection of the neocolonial discourse aimed at defining her and subsuming her, which serves to assert the ambiguity and strength of identity in the face of

the contemporary cultural hegemony. The discussion of the novel can perhaps end up being a critical point where persistent disparities of power practices are questioned in the world of the global literature.

V. Conclusion

Summing up, *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali can serve as a strong example of the complexity of the diasporic identity and the impact of the neo-colonial frameworks. The critique of cultural appropriation has been successfully incorporated into the current research paper in the context of the neo-postcolonial theory, according to which the former is the direct consequence of the latter. The scandals that have surrounded the novel speaks volumes to the need of writers and readers to understand the market forces that create as well as often diminish discourse around marginalized communities. This paper adds to the academic debate by providing a paradigm that mediates the micro-level approach to critique of cultural appropriation and the macro-level approach of structural analysis that is provided by neo-colonialism. Future research should build on the discussion of the impacts of the global publishing industry in the creation of migration and identity discourses by analysing how diasporic literature is received in various cultural and geographic markets. The ongoing controversy on *Brick Lane* is therefore a very timely constant reminder that in the post-imperial times, the battle over cultural control and the demand to have a real representation is still a difficult issue for both writers and critics.

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