

# **From the Mother's Daughter to the Daughters' Mother: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Study of Nazneen's Transformation in *Brick Lane***

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## **Abstract:**

Since its publication in 2003, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* has drawn the attention and acclaim of the readers and the critics alike. As a result, it is found to be discussed and analyzed in manifold ways, for example—as a post-colonial fiction, a diasporic novel, a multicultural text, a feminist or quintessential bildungsroman etc. Since the transformation of Nazneen—the protagonist of the novel—from a fate-believing submissive Bangladeshi village-girl to a self-defining assertive British-resident works as the focal point of the novel, several essays are seen to deal with Nazneen and her evolution in a number of illuminating ways. However, no such essay looks into the text from a feminist psychoanalytic viewpoint. This article, hence, reads the novel in the light of the theory of mother-daughter relationship by Nancy Chodorow to provide the readers answer to the following question: How does Nazneen change from a mother-doting and fate-fearing daughter to a supporting self-reliant mother of her own daughters?

**Keywords: Feminist Psychoanalysis, Mother-Daughter Relationship, Transformation**

## **Introduction:**

*Brick Lane* (2003), the debut novel of the Bangladeshi-born British novelist—Monica Ali, is generally regarded as a significant Anglophone novel of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by a non-native writer. The novelist's smart handling of diverse contemporary issues like migration, racism, religious extremism, garments business, women's empowerment along with different age-old issues like patriarchal oppression, familial crises etc. in the novel has

drawn the attention of both the readers and the literary scholars alike. Naturally, the critics and the researchers are seen to interpret the novel in diverse ways, for instance—as a feminist fiction, a multicultural novel, a post-colonial narrative, a diasporic text, a bildungsroman and so on. However, the protagonist's revolutionary change from a fate-believing passive village-girl of Bangladesh to a self-sufficient inhabitant of England is undoubtedly the focus of the novel. A number of papers, consequently, are found to look into the issue of Nazneen's transformation from different angles, and to present interesting analyses of the novel. However, no such analysis of the text can be claimed to have been done from a feminist psychoanalytic point of view. This article, therefore, provides an intensive reading of the novel in the light of Nancy Chodorow's theory of mother-daughter bonding and separation, and answers the following question: How does Nazneen's character change throughout the novel, i.e. how does Nazneen change from a mother-doting and fate-fearing daughter to a self-reliant supporting mother of her own daughters? Along with focusing on the characters of the mother, Rupban, and the daughter, Nazneen, the essay also sufficiently refers to Nazneen's younger sister Hasina, who has been presented in the novel as her sister's foil. References to other relevant characters like Hamid—Nazneen's father, Chanu—Nazneen's husband, Raqib—Nazneen's son, Shahana and Bibi—Nazneen's daughters, Karim—Nazneen's lover, Razia—Nazneen's friend, and so forth are given in the necessary places to explicate the issue of the psychological development of Nazneen. Providing in-depth analyses of the relevant points taken from the novel, the essay finally claims *Brick Lane* a successful novel in its presentation of socio-psychological growth of Nazneen from a mother-centric passive village girl to a supporting single-mother of her growing up daughters.

**The Mother-Daughter Bond and the Psychological Growth of the Daughter: Nancy Chodorow's Feminist Psychoanalysis:** The issue of mothering children has started getting the attention of the feminist, psychoanalytic and sociological thinkers and scholars since the late 1970s. In this connection, theoretical discussions on the essence and implications of the bond between a mother and her daughter have also been developed to a

significant amount. Among all these diverse analyses, the ones provided by the feminist psychoanalytic scholars are generally regarded as the most complex as well as the most complete ones (see Hirsch, 2003). The feminist psychoanalytic scholars like Melanie Klein, Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein have written on the subject of mother-daughter bond from a feminist perspective using relevant points from Freudian psychoanalysis. However, Nancy Chodorow's analysis of the mother-daughter tie from the female child's birth to her adulthood, presented in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, offers the most acclaimed interpretation of this very special relationship (see *Theories* n.pag.). According to Chodorow, a mother relates to her female child "as an extension of herself", and senses "a double identification with her own mother and herself" through the child (*Theories* n.pag.). The mothers, thus, generally view the lives of the daughters "as an extension of their own" lives, and "experience their daughters as their 'doubles'" (Nayar 74). The daughters, likewise, also define themselves mostly in relation to their mothers not only in their early childhoods but also in their adult lives. In fact, the deep socio-psychological intimacy with their mothers often motivates the daughters to take their mothers as their idols and to follow them blindly throughout their lives. This "inability to discover autonomy from their mothers", thus, causes improper psychological development in the daughters and makes them grow up as fragile beings having "narcissism", "weak ego-boundaries" and "lack of self-control" (Nayar 74). The very strong mother-daughter attachment often becomes a major cause of boundary confusion and identity crisis in adult daughters who then find it extremely difficult to separate themselves from their mothers and to form "their own identities" (Nayar 74). Shared parenting by the mother and the father, however, according to Chodorow, may reduce the chance of the daughter's over-identification with her mother as well as the possibility of the mother's treating the daughter as her double (see *Theories* n.pag.).

**Nazneen's Development in *Brick Lane*: A Literal Sketch:** Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* undoubtedly revolves round the socio-psychological development of its female protagonist, Nazneen. Starting with the description of the problematic birth of the protagonist in her paternal

residence in a remote village in Mymensingh in 1967, the novel ends in the year 2002 with Nazneen's turning into a self-reliant single mother of two growing up daughters in the city of London.

The birth and early days of Nazneen's life are narrated by the omniscient narrator in the first few pages of the first chapter of the novel. The premature birth of an apparently dead daughter makes the mother decide to leave the child to her fate. Even after seeing the critical situation of her newborn daughter, Rupban, Nazneen's mother, says, "Whatever happens, I accept. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate." (14) Thus, the physical and mental development of Nazneen starts with her being left to her fate by her family, especially by her mother. Little Nazneen is frequently told the story of her being left to her fate. Also, she is always encouraged, by her family members and relatives, to be all-enduring and indifferent like her saintly mother. Naturally, Nazneen soon turns into a "wide-faced, watchful" girl who has "no complaints or regrets" (15). So, the fully submissive young village girl readily accepts the match chosen for her by her father, Hamid, and moves away to the far-way city of London with her almost middle-aged husband, Chanu. The new episode of the protagonist's life, which covers the most part of the novel, this way, starts in Tower Hamlets, London in 1985. On the early days of her married life, Nazneen is seen to try her best to think and act like a devoted traditional Bangladeshi wife. She tries to concentrate on the religious practices as well as to act according to her husband's instructions. Ignoring the dominating attitude of her aged and unimpressive husband, she tries hard to love him wholeheartedly, consoling herself with the belief of his being quite "kind and gentle" for a husband (22). Thus, Nazneen is seen to remain busy most of time with different household chores. In her leisure time, likewise, she is found to think about Chanu's interests like his getting a better job or a promotion and such. So, the first few months of her married life is spent mostly in her efforts to prove herself an ideal wife like her saintly mother who taught her to believe in fate, "What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne." (16) Nazneen, thus, is sporadically seen to recall her past days in her parental residence in Bangladesh along with trying to adjust herself with the new environment of the new country and her new family. She is found to think

about her mother, Rupban, as well as her sister, Hasina, and to compare her fate and marital life with those of theirs: "It worried her that Hasina kicked against fate. No good could come of it. ... But then if ... fate cannot be changed, ... then perhaps Hasina was fated to run away with Malek. Maybe she struggled against that, and that was what she could not alter." (22) Different other incidents of her life like the death of her first child—Raqib—within a few months of his birth, the gradual degradation of Chanu—her husband—in his career, the birth and growth of her two daughters—Shahana and Bibi, the development of her friendship with self-supporting Razia etc. also affect Nazneen's understanding of herself as well as the world. Thus, the timid village girl of Bangladesh slowly starts turning into an emotionally strong woman by going through different adverse situations. She, hence, decides to support her family financially by sewing dresses for a garment factory. This effort of Nazneen, taken in her mid thirties, makes her independent not only financially but also psychologically. Her meeting with the young man who soon turns into her secret lover happens in connection with this sewing work. Karim, the smart and handsome young man, comes to her residence to work as a middleman between her and the garment factory. The oratory and the knowledge of this radical person not only attract her but also open her eye about many socio-political issues of the land of that time. This year-long passionate-affair between the two, however, ends with her refusing his proposal of marriage since Nazneen finds Karim's philosophy of life much different from hers. His traditional outlook to women along with his politics-torn turbulent life makes the man an unfit match for her. So, she says to him, "I don't want to marry you. ... It would be too difficult ... for us to be together. So I think we had better stop now." (451-52) In the same way, Nazneen is seen to refuse the proposal of her husband, Chanu, to go back to Bangladesh thinking about the future of her daughters as well as of herself since Britain offers much better and more secured environment to all of them. The novel, then, ends in 2002 in England presenting a picture of the protagonist as a happy and successful single mother who can not only carry out all the responsibilities of the daughters properly but also dare fulfilling her long cherished dream of skating in a sari.

The socio-psychological growth of Nazneen that starts with her birth in her paternal residence in a remote Bangladeshi village in 1967, thus

by the end of the novel, reaches the extent that she successfully transforms into a self-reliant single mother of two dependent daughters in the city of London in the year 2002.

**The Mother-Daughter Bond and Separation in *Brick Lane*: A Detailed Analysis:** The socio-psychological development of Nazneen, the protagonist of *Brick Lane*, might be understood well when it is scrutinized in the light of the theory of mother-daughter bonding and separation provided by the feminist psychoanalytic thinker, Nancy Chodorow. Hence, a close reading of Nazneen's relationship with her mother, Rupban, and, to some extent, with her sister, Hasina, is presented below. Though the focus of the novel as well as the present discussion is Nazneen, references to Hasina are a must since she has been presented in the novel as her sister's foil.

Nazneen's relationship with her mother, undoubtedly, starts with her being in the woman's womb. The novel, however, does not provide much information regarding that time of Nazneen and her mother. Rather it starts with a description of her sudden and problematic birth as well as her mother's response to the incident. Nazneen arrives to the world as a premature and almost stillborn child. Ignoring the advice of the midwife and the relatives, her mother keeps her at home saying, "Whatever happens, I accept. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate. That way, she will be stronger." (14) Miraculously, Nazneen survives, and starts growing up into a devoted daughter as well as a loving sister under the strict guidance of her parents. Being herself a victim of male-domination, her mother—Rupban—teaches her to be all enduring and non-complaining so that she can adjust with this very harsh world of men. Rupban herself has lived her whole life believing in the "mantra" or basic idea, "What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne." (16) So, she frequently says to her daughter, "Just wait and see, that's all we can do." (46) She also discourages them to ask any kind of question about their father's activities. She says, "If God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men." (80) For her having such a tolerant and passive attitude to life, Nazneen's father takes her as a saintly woman. Hence, every now and then he is seen to say to his daughters, "Your mother is a saint.... Don't forget that she comes from a family of saints." (80)

However, this apparently very submissive and all tolerant woman, in reality, carries a heavy heart beneath her outward calm and passive look. Often she weeps and cries to relieve her mental agony. Also, she is seen to share her sorrowful life experiences with her sister when the sister visits her. The two weep, and exchange feelings and experiences as such:

‘We will suffer in silence.’ ...

‘In silence,’ said Amma. ...

‘That is all that is left to us in this life,’ said Auntie. ...

‘We are just women. What can we do?’

‘They know it. That’s why they act as they do.’ (103)

Thus, Rupban, who appears as an all-enduring saint-like figure to her husband and a mysterious passive person to her daughters, definitely is a sensitive and conscious human being. She is pained by the injustices done to her just for her being a woman. But as she is powerless, she just suffers and keeps faith in fate. Knowing no solution to this condition, she tries to teach her daughters—Nazneen and Hasina—to be as calm and patient as possible so that they might better adjust with the day to day sufferings of a woman’s life in times of necessity. Being too young, the two sisters do not understand the sufferings of their mother properly. Nazneen, however, for her being two years older than her sister, feels a bit agitated sometimes, especially when she sees Rupban to weep or cry. She also tries to find out the causes of her mother’s troubles. But as she fails to do that, she tries to make the mother happy by abiding by her advices. She can feel the deep love of Rupban for them hidden beneath all her scolding and weeping, “Amma scolded and cuddled, and smelled as sweet as the skin on the milk when it had been boiled all day with sugar.” (45) The close physical as well as mental bond developed between the mother and the daughter in the very early days of her life, thus, turns into a strong psychological tie in Nazneen’s girlhood and early youth. Her psychological bond with the mother remains similarly close even in the physical absence of Rupban, that is, even after Rupban’s sudden and mysterious death at a quite young age. Nazneen, thus, regardless of her losing her mother just at fourteen, goes on following her for a long period of time. She, following her father’s choice, gets herself married to a London-residing middle-aged expatriate Bangladeshi, named Chanu, just at the age of eighteen. The teaching of her mother regarding fate leads Nazneen to act

this way. So, she is seen to say to her father, “Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma.” (16) Likewise, in her early conjugal life also, she tries hard to be a good wife and an ideal mother. She does all the household chores neatly, and takes good care of her son—Raqib. She strives to love her middle-aged unimpressive husband whole-heartedly. Up to this point of her life, Nazneen can undoubtedly be said to define herself mostly in relation to her mother. Taking Rupban as her idol and guide, she tries to follow her teachings blindly.

However, Nazneen gradually starts feeling the presence of a kind of confusion or contradiction in herself too. When she thinks of her sister—Hasina, who runs away from her parental residence just at the age of sixteen with her lover, she feels doubtful whether she is “beginning to love Chanu, or just getting used to him?” (40) She also sometimes feels critical of the relationship between fate and human action. Hence, she thinks:

... Hasina kicked against fate. No good could come of it. Not a single person could say so. But then if you really looked into it, thought about it more deeply, how could you be sure that Hasina was not simply following her fate? If fate cannot be changed, no matter how you struggle against it, then perhaps Hasina was fated to run away with Malek. Maybe she struggled against that, and that was what she could not alter. Oh, you think it would be simple, having made the decision long, long ago, to be at the beck and call of fate, but how to know which way it is calling you? And there was each and every day to be got through. If Chanu came home this evening and found the place untidy and the spices not even ground, could she put her hands like so and say, don’t ask me why nothing is prepared, it was not I who decided it, it was fate. (22)

Nazneen also, thus, gradually starts thinking about her own life comparing her condition with those of her sister and her late mother. The teachings of her mother regarding fate and life, with the passing of time, seem to become insufficient to pacify her inner urge for self-understanding and self-fulfillment. So, she is seen to have a kind of internal conflict between her mother-taught as well as socially-inflicted reason and her very own passion for self-realization:

It was her place to sit and wait. Even if the tornado was heading directly towards her. For her, there was nothing else to be done. Nothing else that God wanted her to do. Sometimes she wanted to get up and run. Most of the time she did not want to run but neither did she want to sit still. How difficult it was, this business of sitting still. But there was nothing really to complain of. There was Chanu, who was kind and never beat her. There was Raqib. And there was this shapeless, nameless thing that crawled across her shoulders and nested in her hair and poisoned her lungs, that made her both restless and listless. What do you want with me? she asked it. What do you want? It hissed back. She pretended not to hear, but it got louder. She made bargains with it. No more eating in the middle of the night. No more dreaming of ice, and blades, and spangles. No more missed prayers. No more gossip. No more disrespect to my husband. She offered all these things for it to leave her. It listened quietly, and then burrowed deeper into her internal organs. (101-102)

Defying the suggestions of her husband, Nazneen, hence, learns English, makes herself acquainted with the locality, befriends a working-class woman—Razia, and dreams of doing ice-skating. She later starts supporting her family financially by sewing dresses for a garment factory when her husband faces acute financial hardship. She even dares to respond positively to Karim, the middleman of the garment factory, when he approaches towards her to make love. Her affair with this handsome young man not only makes her feel the true passions of love but also makes her realize her capability and significance. Still, Nazneen finishes her year-long relationship with Karim and refuses his proposal of marriage as soon as she notices the presence of a traditional chauvinistic mentality in him. She even refuses to go back to her motherland when her frustrated husband returns there being utterly unsuccessful in his career in London. Though she is frequently seen to recall her premarital life with her mother and younger sister in Bangladesh as well as to eagerly wish to meet her unfortunate sister living there, Nazneen does not go back. This very tough decision of staying back in England as a single mother, taking the challenge of looking after two growing up daughters all alone, demonstrates the complete evolution of her.

This Nazneen is brave, rational, proactive and fully self-directed. She no more needs the instructions of anyone, not even those of her mother, to walk in the thorny path of life. She is no more worried about the anger of her deceased mother whose soul she believes to roam around her and to monitor her all the time. Also she is not afraid of fate anymore, and so, can take steps on her own about herself as well as her daughters rather than just passively waiting for something good to happen or just to accept anything that comes on her way on its own. The novel, hence, ends with a picture of a happy and carefree Nazneen in company with her daughters, Shahana and Bibi, and her best friend, Razia, doing ice-skating as a pastime.

The total socio-psychological growth of Nazneen, thus, takes a long time to come about. However, the novelist—Monica Ali—is seen to depict it with great skill and much success. She effectively uses the third person omniscient narrator to bring out the innermost issues of the mind and the heart of Nazneen to us—the readers. She also uses dreams or hallucinations to reveal the thoughts and feelings of the central character of the novel. Her use of letters not only adds another dimension to the style of the novel but also to the issue of plot and theme development. As can be noticed from the earlier discussion, Nazneen arrives to the world as a fighter. As her mother leaves her to her fate, she also fights against it with all her power. In her girlhood, she is found to be intelligent and inquisitive enough to observe her surroundings keenly. So, her passive behaviour in the first two decades of her life is mostly the result of her strong bonds with her mother who teaches her to be submissive and fate-fearing. Nazneen's inner thoughts regarding her mother are explicitly depicted in many places of the novel some of which have already been mentioned in the essay. The emergence of a kind of dilemma regarding following her mother's guidance or acting on her own decision is also portrayed with mastery in a number of points of the narrative. References to a few of these have already been presented in the essay too. Even, the culminating part of the protagonist's development, taking place in the last two chapters of the novel, has also been mentioned earlier in the essay. Only the issues triggering the last episode of Nazneen's psychological growth are now left to be referred. Hence, the dream cum hallucination of Nazneen—presented in Chapter Eighteen, and the last letter of Hasina—presented in Chapter Nineteen, are shortly mentioned now. The

nearly three-page long hallucination scene starts with Nazneen's dreaming of Gouripur, waking up and asking her mother for necessary directions. It ends with her crying aloud against the directions of her mother.

'What shall I do now, Amma?' She said out loud.

Amma walked through the door wearing her best sari.... 'You modern girls. You'll do what you like'.... 'But you should remember one thing at least.'

'What's that?' Nazneen closed her eyes. Now that Amma had come, she wanted her to go away again.

There was no reply.

Nazneen opened her eyes.

'That's better,' said Amma...

'Don't think I wasn't watching you,' Amma snapped.... 'When you stood between your son and his Fate, you robbed him of any chance.' Amma walked towards her. ... 'Now say this to yourself, and say it out loud, "I killed my son. I killed my son."'

'No!' screamed Nazneen. (431-32)

The last letter of her sister, Hasina, plays a very significant role in solving Nazneen's dilemma regarding accepting fate blindly or making her own choice. In the letter, sent from Dhaka in October 2001, Hasina reveals the secret of her mother's mysterious and sudden death in her early thirties. She writes:

*Amma always say we are women what can we do? If she here now I know what she say I know that too well. But I am not like her. Waiting around. Suffering around. She wrong. So many ways. At the end only she act. She who think all path is closed for her. She take the only one forbidden.*

*Forgive me sister I must tell you now this secret so long held inside me.*

...

*May Allah forgive her. It she who leave.*

*May Allah show His Mercy onto her. She see no other way.*

(434-36)

The letter, in association with the hallucination, works as an eye-opener to Nazneen. She understands the reason behind Hasina's continuous strives for

happiness. She also realizes the necessity of her self-establishment leaving everything behind. Thus, Nazneen becomes able to break away with her mother fully after a long many years.

**Conclusion:** *Brick Lane*, in sum, is a tale of Nazneen and her socio-psychological development. The novel, definitely, is an account of both her struggles and empowerment. Two relevant characters—Rupban, her mother, and Hasina, her sister—work separately to help her understand the tough realities of female life in this male-dominating world. They also work as two totally different models of life that a woman can choose. The passive life of her fate-believing mother which ended with her committing suicide just at the age of thirty-four works as an example of self-compromise and self-denial to her. The turbulent life of her fate-denying sister, on the other hand, appears as an example of unsuccessful efforts for self-assertion and self-reliance. Nazneen's realization of all these, however, come a bit late, i.e. in her early thirties. She is found to walk the path of life mostly following the directions of her mother. The strong mother-daughter bond here provokes her to take her mother as her guide. The sisterly bond with her sister, on the other hand, makes her feel for the unfortunate younger sister, but not to follow her path since that does not match her mother's. The different lessons of her life gradually make the mother-daughter bond shaky, and lead her to try her own possible route. And the final development in Nazneen's outlook happens with her knowing the secret of her mother's death. Since her mother has got no positive result in her life following the fate-decided path, Nazneen separates her way from that of her mother. She rather decides to try proactively to write her own fate. Here she, to some extent, follows the path of her sister who is repeatedly seen to try to make her own luck. However, the difference between the two lies in one's choosing rationally and the other's choosing emotionally. The novel, thus, successfully depicts the issue of mother-daughter bonding and separation as well as its impact on a daughter's life with the help of the characters of Rupban, Nazneen and Hasina.

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