On Cultural Identity in *Brick Lane* From the Perspective of Postcolonialism

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This paper explores the process of establishing cultural identity among the three leading characters and analyzes the causes for multiple cultural identity in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*.

Keywords: cultural identity, *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali

Introduction

Monica Ali, a distinguished Bangladesh-British writer, enjoys great prestige in the world after her publication of *Brick Lane*. The experiences of the main characters in this novel symbolize the necessity of establishing mixed ethnic cultural identity in the background of multiple cultures. This paper is intended to arouse people's attention towards the mixed ethnic culture, promote cultural diversity, and achieve the integration of different cultures in the East and the West by the study on the construction of cultural identity.

Postcolonialism

It is considered that Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri C. Spivak have made great contributions to the development of postcolonialism, a concept which appears in the late 1970s, emphasizes cultural invasion, and focuses on the field of cultural ideology. It uses a placid mode to reveal "an extreme spirit of cultural hegemony and cultural imperialism" (Yang, 1996). Since the advent of the new century, it has drawn much attention in the field of academic research and enjoyed a great reputation with its rapid development. It also has a great influence on literary criticism all around the world and also reshapes the subjectivity of the minority people. Postcolonialism, or postcolonial studies, is an academic discipline that analyzes, explains, and responds to the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism. Drawing from postmodern schools of thought, postcolonial studies analyze the politics of knowledge (creation, control, and distribution) by examining the functional relations of social and political power that sustain colonialism and neocolonialism—the imperial regime's depictions (social, political, and cultural) of the colonizer and of the colonized.

Cultural Identity in the Context of Postcolonialism

Cultural identity, also known as culture recognition, "involves the characteristic of national and cultural

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features in the research of literature and culture” (Wu, 2009). Its academic value has been widely explored by some scholars in the field of feminism and postcolonialism. It has a great influence on the study of Western cultural identity.

Some famous cultural critics, such as Edward W. Said and Homi Bahabha study cultural identity from the perspective of postcolonialism. In his book *After the Last Sky*, Edward W. Said claims “identity—who are we where are we from and what are we—is hard to maintain for the refugee” (Said, 1998). It forces Said to pay more attention to the necessity of building cultural politics confronted with the shock of cultural hegemony. Later, Homi Bahabha adopts the cultural hybridization theory originated from Said and expounds it further. He employs hybridity, mimicry, and the “third space” to support his theoretical framework. In *Brick Lane*, the three leading characters have different attitudes towards cultural identity so that the construction of their new identity varies a lot.

Nazneen’s Success in Cultural Identity Construction

In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen is a traditional Bengali woman who follows her husband to migrate to Britain. During the long time of living in Britain, she gradually finds her true self, arouses her awareness of independence, and expects to gain the status in the British society. However, the road, for which she attempts to look for the culture recognition, is filled of thistles and thorns under the mixture of postcolonialism and multiculturalism in Britain. With the development of her self-awareness, Nazneen has her own ideas and knows how to make a decision independently. At the end of this novel, Nazneen stays in London with her two daughters to start a brand-new life. Although challenges remain, Nazneen is ready to face difficulties in the future. Thanks to the help of her friends and the rebellions against her husband, Nazneen finally constructs her cultural identity in Britain.

Chanu’s Struggle in Ambivalent Cultural Identity

Suffering from the characteristics of feminism, it is impossible for oriental men to achieve their status and success. Chanu, Nazneen’s husband, a loser under the Western influence, gradually understands that discrimination and privilege will not help him realize his dream. As a result, he decides to go back to Bangladesh. In this novel, the author creates Chanu as a contrast to Nazneen and his ambivalent cultural identity vividly serves as a foil to Nazneen’s success. Confronted with cultural diversity, Chanu is arrogant and such an attitude gets him into the dilemma of two cultures. He is unable to balance his personal value and national identity. With a distorted mind and ambivalent cultural value, Chanu tries hard to find a foothold in London but in vain. Finally, he fails not establish his British cultural identity and has to return to Bangladesh alone.

Karim’s Loss in Cultural Identity

Karim, a representative of Bengali history and culture, is in the same situation with Chanu that he cannot win himself a position in Britain. In this novel, Karim is a man with confidence and willing to listen to people’s suggestion. He is one of the second generation of Bengali immigrants, so he is at first considered as a highly Westernized man by Nazneen. However, during the way to establishing cultural identity, Karim lost in the conflicts of the traditional Bengali culture and Western culture. Nationalism, which is fully manifested in his character, witnesses his changes in the process of searching for the Bengali root. Karim, together with Chanu, cannot build his cultural identity in the end, so he has to go back to Bangladeshi, as well.

The Causes for Multiple Cultural Identity in *Brick Lane*

All the above three main characters' different cultural identities are caused by various factors. During the 20th century, English literature was widely recognized because of its worldwide and contemporary effects. At that time, most of the contemporary novels in Britain reveal the conflict and integration of multiple cultures. Monica Ali notices the phenomenon and she finally chooses hybridity to illustrate the process of establishing cultural identity. From the vivid description in *Brick Lane*, it can be concluded that several factors result in various culture identities.

Eurocentric Prejudice and Cultural Hegemony

In orientalism, Said holds that the existence of the oriental tradition reflects the superiority of Western culture. The Eurocentric prejudice seems to be deeply rooted in many white people's mind. Although cultural diversity develops, it is hard for them to get rid of such prejudice. In the background of postcolonialism, cultural hegemony still exists. In Britain, East London is the habitual residence for Bengali immigrants. Different from other districts, this area is very hard to be fully accepted by the mainstream culture. Just as Homi Bhabha (1996) put it, the Brick Lane community is the "third space" excluded from Western culture. Cultural hegemony seems to be the barrier that separates the Western culture from the Eastern culture, which makes it harder and harder to realize cultural integration. In this novel, Nazeen, Chanu, and Karim hold different opinions to cultural identity. Nazeen decides to stay in London while Chanu and Karim lose themselves and have to go back home. The Western culture attracts Nazeen and she observes keenly of the outside world so as to survive in modern society. In contrast, Chanu and Karim get lost in the conflicts of different cultures. The results reveal that the differences in culture are the key factors to establish cultural identity and also become a barricade for many immigrants to build their culture identities.

Racial Discrimination and Postcolonial Depression

With the revolution of cultural diversity, immigrants may suffer a lot when confronted with the current trend. However, the mainstream culture in Western countries is dominated by white people. The privilege grants white people a superior stage to treat those immigrants. The eagerness may become a barricade for those immigrants to assimilate into a Western community. Worse than that, immigrants may lose their original cultural identity. Generally speaking, racial discrimination and postcolonial depression force immigrants to go back to where they come from. In the theory of postcolonialism, Homi Bhabha (1996) deemed that the "third space" is the cultural integration between colonizers and the colonized. So, it is hard for those immigrants to get fair treatment in such an environment. It also means that in the "third space", the backward Eastern culture integrates with the advanced Western culture so that the colonized can construct their cultural identity. Only in this way, can the Bengali immigrants build their spiritual home under the conflicts of cultural hegemony.

Language Crisis and Religious Dilemma

"Language plays an inevitable role in terms of the construction and inheritance of the cultural world" (Fanon, 1967). It is a symbol of cultural identity. The status of a person in a society has a natural link between his daily language and the recognition of cultural identity. It is the bond which links the past and the future and also functions as the carrier of culture. It can also continue the social mainstream values, such as the value of worth, morality, and aesthetics. In the perspective of postcolonialism, cultural identity is an unstable form which exists in the process of constant change and formation. It means that identity is constructed by the

contact of “self” and “the other”. Nation, race, social class, religion, geographical location, and social condition may have an effect on the formation of cultural identity.

Conclusion

Due to Monica Ali’s special experience, she often portrays typical ethnic women in her novels in order to arouse people’s attention to immigrants’ issue. Through the way to show the behavior of characters in this novel, Monica Ali hopes to unveil the mysterious mask of Bangladeshi and reveal the conflicts of the two cultures between the West and the East.

By analyzing causes for multiple cultural identity construction, it is clear that a series of complicated factors lead to different results. No matter which culture the immigrants belongs to, economic and political condition is always the main factor to decide the construction of cultural identity. As one of the Bengali immigrants, Nazneen is the symbol of the connection between the British values and Bengali culture. Based on the examples of Nazneen, Chanu, and Karim, Monica Ali (2003) confirmed the modernization combined with the mixture of Eastern and Western cultures in Britain. In postcolonial society, actually speaking, nothing is fixed and cultural identity also represents the existence of cultural fluidity.

In the 21st century, cultural diversity is an inevitable trend and no one country can say no to it. In contemporary society, people embrace different cultures to become one of their own parts. Thus, understanding Monica Ali’s novel *Brick Lane* from the perspective of postcolonialism can reveal Monica Ali’s writing characteristics. On the other hand, it can be useful for awakening senses of those who cannot find a balance between their national culture and the foreign culture. Besides, it may improve the possibility to establish their cultural identity and promote the integration of different cultures. However, it is a long way to help those Bengali immigrants get rid of discrimination from white people. Under the trend of cultural diversity and globalization, it may come true and have a bright future.

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