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CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ISSUES OF BELONGING IN MONICA ALI'S BRICK LANE (2004)

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to answer the question as to how notions of belonging are represented in the novel *Brick Lane* (2004) by Monica Ali. Shaped by a comparison of Englishness and Britishness, this research furthermore explores how cultural identity is constructed in the novel. Framed by Bechhofer's (2009) boundaries of identity and Hussain's (2005) study on first- and second-generation British Pakistanis, this thesis will present a close-reading of *Brick Lane.* The thesis will furthermore situate its own readings of *Brick Lane* in relation to a number of academic articles on Ali's novel. Findings will highlight themes of gender, religion, birthplace, language and history. As will be argued in this thesis, these are the primary elements that influence the construction of cultural identity and a sense of belonging for characters in *Brick Lane*.

Key words: cultural identity, assimilation, immigrants, belonging, Englishness, Britishness, Brick Lane, Monica Ali

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Social identities in the United Kingdom are fragmenting and reforming due to the increasing influence of globalisation. With just under 9.4 million foreign-born citizens living in the United Kingdom in 2017[1], defining cultural identity has become a progressively complicated issue in the dynamic world of today. European Union migration and migrant population statistics show the residence of the largest numbers of non-nationals, meaning people who hold citizenship of a non-member country, living in the EU Member States on 1 January 2018. The highest populations were found in Germany (9.7 million persons), the United Kingdom (6.3 million), Italy (5.1 million), France (4.7million) and Spain (4.6 million).[2] Non-nationals in these five Member States collectively represented 76 % of the total number of non-nationals living in all of the EU Member States.[3] With 6.3 million non-nationals living in the United Kingdom in 2018[4], the country has developed into a melting pot for many cultures, ethnic backgrounds, and values.

England is home to the largest city of the United Kingdom: London. Statistics show that forty-one percent of London's inner-city constituted of foreign-born people in 2017.[5] A multicultural society like this challenges notions of cultural identity. Therefore, establishing what it means to be English in England's current globalised and multicultural society may provide people with a sense of comfort and stability. Bechhofer (2009) uses the term ''boundaries of identity'' to explain who is accepted as part of a community and who is rejected as an *Other* when studying the integration of people in a new cultural environment.[6] The key

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[1] Vargas-Silva, C., Rienzo, C. "Migrants in the UK: An Overview." Migration Observatory. https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-an-overview/.
[2] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/pdfscache/1275.pdf. p.9.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Vargas-Silva, C., Rienzo. C. "Migrants in the UK: An Overview." Migration Observatory. https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-an-overview/.
[6] Bechhofer, F., McCrone, D., & Palgrave Connect (Online service). (2009): 9-10. National identity, nationalism and constitutional change. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/978023023414

factors that determine these boundaries according to Bechhofer are: birthplace, residence, ancestry, accent, race, dress, bloodline and other general social elements.[7] Contemporary fiction on the topic of cultural identity can give readers insight into the way authors treat these boundaries, which Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2004) is an example of. As Yousef (2019) argues, ''*Brick Lane* can be read as an attempt to address the problematics of identity, displacement, hybridity, assimilation, integration, separation, marginalization, alienation and other concomitant concepts through its use of the fictional story of some Bengali immigrants living in London and exposed to a markedly different culture, showing how these factors affect the cultural identity of the characters.''[8] Ali's treatment of cultural identity within this novel may be used as a measure of determining what boundaries of identity consist of in her fiction and to what extent they correlate with Bechhofer's theory, and those of other researchers.

Monica Ali is a Bangladeshi-born British novelist whose debut novel *Brick Lane* was first published in 2003[9] and has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in the same year. The novel was named after a street at the heart of London's Bangladeshi community, and follows the life of an immigrant woman, Nazneen, who moves to London at the age of 18. *Brick Lane* explores the main characters' attempt at fitting into a larger ethnic community through themes of cultural identity and belonging. The main protagonist, Nazneen, is torn between her Bangladeshi background and her new identity in London. Likewise, her friend Razia and her daughter Shahana have difficulties adopting English values while still wanting to be respected by immigrants in their neighbourhood who do not appreciate these western notions of cultural identity. As I will show through my analysis of these characters, and many others, *Brick Lane* is an illustration of the struggle immigrants in England face with constructing cultural identity.

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[7] Ibid., p. 6.

[8] Yousef, Tawfiq. "Cultural Identity in Monica Ali's Brick Lane: A Bhabhian Perspective." *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies* 19, no. 1 (2019): 75. https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.19.1.4.

[9] This thesis discusses the 2004 edition of the book.

In order to contextualise the societal and cultural issues which *Brick Lane* highlights, this thesis will incorporate a theoretical framework discussing a selection of sociological writings on contemporary multiculturalism in England, such as Bechhofer (2009) and Hussain et. Al (2005). The aim of this theoretical framework will not be to present a conventional set of literary theories. Rather, I will be approaching my case study from a sociological and cultural perspective, by analysing the narratives in *Brick Lane* as a reflection of society. Adopting such a point of view limited to the cultural and sociological aspects of *Brick Lane* suits both the themes of the novel as well as the author of the book. The novel and its author have been the topic of many academic articles on sociological issues, a number of which I will include in my case study chapters. To suit the sociological and cultural nature of my research topic, my theoretical framework consists of research articles on contemporary cultural identity in England. The various articles collectively present the different cultural elements which I will use to analyse my case study in chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis. The articles form a unified foundation and framework for my research on *Brick Lane* by presenting current issues in English identity, in the context of Britishness in England.[10] *Brick Lane* can be seen as a work of fiction which reflects the contemporary issues presented in these articles. Analysing Ali's work highlights the ways in which the various cultural and sociological elements presented in my theoretical framework are incorporated in the novel.

The aforementioned cultural and sociological elements are referred to by Bechhofer as ''boundaries of identity''. What I aim to present in my research is how boundaries of identity in a multicultural context are portrayed in *Brick Lane*, to establish what it means to be English in today's multicultural England according to Monica Ali's novel. To gather the data needed to find an answer to this issue, I will be performing a close-reading of *Brick Lane*. My aim is to research which elements make up the boundaries of identity in *Brick Lane* and how the novel

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[10] I will go into further detail on this in chapter 1.

represents cultural identity. I will approach this issue through the lens of the work of Hussain et Al. (2005), who found that ''second generation British Pakistanis perceive that others – the dominant white population – do not yet fully accept that they belong in Britain and that they are British, despite this generation feeling a sense of belonging themselves. These British Pakistanis feel they are part of the national community at the level of their identities as citizens, but they do not regard themselves as being British in the conventional sense of national identity.''[11] The question I aim to answer is how this notion of belonging presents itself in *Brick Lane* and how this ties in with boundaries of cultural identity as portrayed in the novel.

Chapter 1 of this thesis will provide the theoretical background to my research, including a framework of sociological writings on contemporary multiculturalism and cultural identity in England, such as Bechhofer (2009) and Hussain et Al. (2005). Chapter 2 and 3 will present a close-reading of *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali. These chapters will incorporate themes of gender, religion, birthplace, language and history, the majority of which are deduced from the articles presented in my theoretical framework. The case study chapters will furthermore situate their own readings of *Brick Lane* in relation to a number of academic articles on Ali's novel. In chapter 4 I will then summarize my findings to conclude my thesis and provide suggestions for further research in the field. The final part of my paper will include a bibliography and references.

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[11] Hussain, Yasmin, and Paul Bagguley. "Citizenship, Ethnicity and Identity." Sociology 39, no. 3 (2005): 421. doi:10.1177/0038038505052493.

CHAPTER 1:

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ISSUES OF BELONGING AND ASSIMILATION IN

ENGLISH AND BRITISH IDENTITY

In this chapter I will discuss the theoretical framework behind my analysis of *Brick Lane* (2004) by Monica Ali. *Brick Lane* follows the life of first- and second-generation immigrants in England. In the novel, characters struggle with adopting English identity while simultaneously holding onto the traditions of their foreign background. The aim of this chapter is therefore to help understand why such struggles may arise, both for ethnic minorities in England and consequently for characters in *Brick Lane*. The narratives in *Brick Lane* are an illustration of the real-life cultural struggles immigrants in England face today. Understanding these struggles will therefore help readers better understand the cultural context in which the narratives of *Brick Lane* are set.

As I will present in this chapter, research has found that immigrants have less difficulty identifying with Britishness than they do with Englishness. In this chapter I will therefore compare and contrast English and British identity in terms of belonging and assimilation, in order to uncover the limitations of English identity compared to Britishness. Underscoring the differences between English and British identity helps explain why minority groups in England struggle with identifying with English identity. In this chapter I will therefore discuss the key elements that are responsible for the exclusivity of English identity as opposed to Britishness. I will first discuss elements, or boundaries of identity, that play a role in the construction of English identity, as well as the exclusivity that is felt by native and non-native English residents due to the way these elements manifest in society. Here I will highlight elements of citizenship, birthplace, religion, and language. I will then discuss the fact that Englishness and Britishness differ in the way each identity incorporates boundaries of identity. Findings will highlight elements of history and ethnicity. As I will conclude, British and English identity treat these

elements in a different way. That is to say, British identity has important characteristics which English identity lacks. As a result, Englishness is experienced to be more exclusive than Britishness. Understanding the differences between English and British identity in England therefore helps explain why some characters in *Brick Lane* experience difficulty identifying with Englishness. Furthermore, it helps explain how characters in *Brick Lane* construct cultural identity, and which elements play a role in this process.

When studying the integration of people in a foreign country, it is necessary to establish the measures by which we can derive from how successful people are in adopting a new cultural identity. The aim of establishing these measures is to define what elements determine whether a person fits within their foreign identity or not, and whether it is at all possible for them to fully adapt to this new identity. When referring to the situation of immigrants in England, a successful integration would entail that the native English accept immigrants as part of their cultural identity and immigrants themselves too feel a sense of belonging within their new environment. Defining how cultural identity is constructed can help explain why some people in England feel less of a sense of belonging than others do, such as immigrants in *Brick Lane*. As research like Frank Bechhofer (2009) and Yasmin Hussain (2005) has found, the issues that these characters in Monica Ali's novel face are not purely fictional, but are based on the current socio-cultural climate of England, where English identity is considered to be rather exclusive in comparison to British identity.

Bechhofer (2009) uses the term ''boundaries of identity'' to define which elements make up the identity profile of a nation. These boundaries can be seen as cultural markers, or characteristics which together build the basis for cultural identity. They in turn affect who is accepted as part of a community and who is rejected as an *Other*, as well as what place one

thinks of as ''home'' and which place one sees as foreign[12]. The characters of Chanu and Karim in *Brick Lane*, who I will elaborate on further in the next chapters, contrast each other in this sense: Chanu considers Bangladesh to be his ''home,'' whereas Karim calls England his ''home,'' although both live in England for the majority of the story. The difference in their sense of belonging depends on a number of factors, which can all be considered ''boundaries of identity.'' Birthplace, generation, and language are a couple of these factors. Chanu is born in Bangladesh whereas Karim is born in England. The different birthplaces in turn result in a generational gap between the two, Karim being a second-generation immigrant who experiences ''home'' differently to Chanu who is a first-generation immigrant. Furthermore, Karim speaks fluent English, whereas Chanu refuses to speak it due to his negative connotations of the language relating to colonial history. As I will show through my analysis of the main characters in *Brick Lane* in chapter 2 and 3 of my paper*,* these identity boundaries therefore explain how people perceive their own cultural identity in relation to their broader environment. Birthplace, residence, language, accent, race, dress, class, religion and other general social elements are key aspects that Bechhofer's theory names as being influential to the construction of national identity.[13] I will be analysing the characters in *Brick Lane* to establish which of these elements are portrayed in the novel and to what extent they influence identity construction and issues of belonging of the characters in England, which is where most of the story is set.

Yasmin Hussain (2005) studies citizenship as a mode of identity in relation to national identity, religion and ethnicity.[14] First- and second-generation British Pakistanis are compared

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[12] Bechhofer, F., McCrone, D., & Palgrave Connect (Online service). (2009): 10-11. National identity, nationalism and constitutional change. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/978023023414

[13] Ibid., p. 6.

[14] Hussain, Yasmin, and Paul Bagguley. "Citizenship, Ethnicity and Identity." Sociology 39, no. 3 (2005): 407. doi:10.1177/0038038505052493.

to show the difference in their identities as British citizens.[15] The findings can be used to exemplify the relevance of Bechhofer's identity boundaries to the construction of cultural identity. As Hussain points out, religion and ethnicity influence whether English residents experience themselves to be part of English identity or not, as minorities in England demonstrate: ''Although young South Asian people identify strongly with Britain as citizens, this is constantly negated by their experiences of British racism, which has focused on their ethnicity and since 2001 has especially focused on Muslims.''[16] The Urban Riots of 2001 are a major influence on the development of characters in *Brick Lane*. Karim is the main character where this influence can be seen, as his character radicalizes through the course of the novel as a result of religious tensions in England, heightened by conflicts on a global scale. Karim's story arc is a portrayal of the struggle Muslim immigrants in England face due to globalized religious conflicts, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, which local Muslim minorities in England consequently suffer under. The Oldham riots, part of the wider urban riots of 2001, are discussed in the novel and can be seen to alienate immigrants from native English residents. I will therefore discuss the role of religion in creating a sense of belonging for immigrants in *Brick Lane* in chapter 2, along with the role of gender and dress.

Language is another key element that influences the formation of identity, and correlates with racism: ''Skin colour and physical characteristics are not the only means of identifying difference: lack of fluency in English can also give rise to racism and negative stereotyping.''[17] One of the main characters in *Brick Lane,* Chanu, and his daughters Shahana and Bibi, are an example of characters developing identity through language in contrasting ways. Chanu strongly disassociates himself from the English by refusing to speak their language. His daughters, however, identify more with English identity and therefore adopt the

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., p. 416.
[17] Ibid., p. 418.

language. They even speak it when at home with their family, much to the dismay of their father who feels like he is losing his daughters to a country that is not his ''home'', although his daughters think differently. Chanu and his daughters show that citizenship and birthplace are elements of identification, of which the meaning seems to differ between older and younger generations of British Pakistanis: ''The younger generation born here were seen by themselves and felt by their parents, to be British citizens with the same rights as any other British citizen. The older generation express what we would term 'denizen identities': they feel that their presence in Britain is not one of a citizenship right, and consequently the younger generation see them, and the first-generation migrants feel themselves, as not having legitimate voice.''[18] The case of British Pakistanis highlights the sense of exclusion that is experienced amongst immigrants in Britain. The exclusivity of English identity boundaries, as Bechhofer calls them, can be seen to drive people in England further apart, as is the case especially for minority groups trying to fit in. The characters in *Brick Lane* are a portrayal of these minority groups, who each experience a sense of belonging in different ways. Some of them feel at home in England, though others do not. This sense of home, and likewise construction of cultural identity, is highly influenced by elements such as citizenship, birthplace, language and religion, as Hussain (2005) highlights.

History is another key element in the construction of identity for characters in *Brick Lane*. This is primarily portrayed through the character Chanu, who distances himself from England because of its colonial history with his native country Bangladesh.[19] Referencing Anthony Smith (1991), Anthony Moran (2011) quotes that: ''national identities involve particularistic configurations of ethnic cores, myths and memories, religious beliefs, language, connections with territory, and political values.''[20] This sense of identity stems from historical,

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[18] Ibid.

[19] I will discuss this further in chapter 3.

[20]Moran, Anthony. "Multiculturalism as Nation-building in Australia: Inclusive National Identity and the Embrace of Diversity." Ethnic and Racial Studies 34, no. 12 (2011): 4. doi:10.1080/01419870.2011.573081.

collective events and experiences and cannot be imposed on people.[21] Moran argues that national identities overall typically reflect an emphasis on shared cultural inheritance and way of life,[22] which Chanu and others seem to lack. Bechhofer however provides a point of view that challenges the idea of national identities emphasising history and collective experiences. Through comparing the notions of Englishness and Britishness in terms of how inclusive of an identity either are considered to be, Bechhofer found that Englishness and Britishness are in fact not equally inclusive national identities: immigrants moving to England struggle with identifying with the notion of Englishness, more so than they do with Britishness.[23] As I will present in the following paragraphs, the differences between English and British identity highlight the limitations of Englishness. These findings in turn contextualise the cultural identity issues characters in *Brick Lane* face.

It may seem straightforward that Englishness and Britishness are not equally inclusive national identities, as Britain as a whole is representative of a larger number and variety of people than England. Englishness and Britishness have, however, not always been, and by many people still are not, considered separate identities by English residents, as the following observation by Bechhofer (2009) shows: ''people in England can easily come to regard England and Britain as synonymous with each other. The remainder of the United Kingdom impinges little on their everyday lives or consciences. As a result, they can happily and freely describe themselves as English on one occasion, British on another – and mean little or nothing by the difference.''[24] Reflecting on recent political changes however, such as Scotland and Wales becoming separate national-political institutions, Bechhofer continues to note that: ''If people in England were not previously aware of the distinction between Britain and England,

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[21] Ibid..
[22] Ibid.
[23] Bechhofer, F., McCrone, D., & Palgrave Connect (Online service). (2009): 58. National identity, nationalism and constitutional change. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/978023023414
[24] Ibid., p. 41.

then arguably they ought to be now.''[25] This suggest that being British and being English no longer carry the same implications it once used to. This change is highly notable in the light of recent processes that have influenced the diversification of England's demographic massively: ''thanks to post-war immigration and in particular immigration from the New Commonwealth, England has become a relatively diverse society in terms of its ethnic composition. Indeed its capital, London, is now often described as one of the most diverse cities in the world.''[26] As statistics show, 41% of inner-London constituted of foreign-born people in 2017.[27] Overall, ''between 2004 and 2017 the foreign-born population in the UK nearly doubled from 5.3 million to around 9.4 million.''[28] Due to such rapid changes in England's ethnic composition one would expect England's national identity to have become more inclusive to different ethnic backgrounds. Bechhofer's study, however, found the opposite to be true.

Bechhofer examined whether ''people currently resident in England describe themselves as English, British, or both.''[29] The results show that ''many people freely choose both English and British identities. In most years just over a third, sometimes rather more, have opted to say that both identities best described themselves. Perhaps for many people the two identities do indeed constitute a distinction without a difference?''[30] This remark refers back to the Bechhofer's initial assumption that England and Britain are seen as synonymous. However, the research found that ''when people are asked to choose just one identity, it is English identity that is increasingly more common.''[31] The observations so far would suggest

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., p. 42.
[27] Vargas-Silva, C., Rienzo. C. "Migrants in the UK: An Overview." Migration Observatory. https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-an-overview/.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Bechhofer, F., McCrone, D., & Palgrave Connect (Online service). (2009): 44. National identity, nationalism and constitutional change. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/978023023414
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

that Englishness is increasingly favoured as the national identity English residents associate themselves with. Though, issues of multiculturalism have thus far not been taken into regard.

It has been found that ethnicity is a key element separating British identity from English identity. Consequently, ethnicity divides groups of people that live in the same country but do not jointly associate with an identity that aims to include everyone in England. In Bechhofer's later section, the relevance of ethnicity in developing a sense of belonging within the English national identity becomes apparent: ''among those who say they are 'white' the proportion saying they are English has been little different from the proportion claiming to be British. But among those who claim any other ethnic identity only a relatively small minority say they are English, while over half state they are British.''[32] The results show that ethnicity has a major influence in whether a person associates with being English or British: people coming from diverse ethnic backgrounds feel less connected to the English identity than the British one, despite English identity being an increasingly more common choice when asked to identify with one of the two identities.[33] It can thus be concluded that English identity is experienced as being more exclusive than British identity: ''It seems that Englishness is not something with which many of those from an ethnic minority background feel much empathy. Less than 38 per cent of this group say they are British, not English, compared with just 8 per cent of those who state they are 'white'.''[34] Understanding the differences between English and British identity in England may further explain why the main characters in *Brick Lane* struggle with identifying with the English identity. Furthermore, it helps explain how characters in *Brick Lane* construct cultural identity, and which elements play a role in this process. Identity boundaries in England, as can be concluded from Bechhofer's findings, create expectations amongst native and non-native English residents of what an ''English'' person ought to look like physically.

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[32] Ibid., p. 58.
[33] Ibid., p. 44.
[34] Ibid., p. 58.

The image both natives and immigrants have of English identity, is that it is predominantly white. Considering the main characters in *Brick Lane* have ethnic backgrounds that are non-white, the English identity proves to be problematic to them as a result of its exclusive profile.

Interestingly enough, the same sense of exclusivity applies to the way English identity is perceived by native English residents. In a different survey people were asked whether ''People from outside the United Kingdom who move permanently to England to live and work here are entitled to describe themselves as British if they want to.''[35] It was found that ''Among those who said they were English, just 34 per cent agreed with this statement; among those who said they were British as many as 44 per cent did so.''[36] The same question was then asked, replacing British with English. It was found that ''Just 27 per cent of those who would call themselves English agree that they could, whereas 38 per cent of those who regard themselves as British do so.''[37] The article concludes that there is an ''implicit recognition that English is considered to be a more exclusive identity.''[38] As Bechhofer highlights, ethnicity is a key element influencing this exclusive profile of English identity.

Uberoi (2010) argues that ''a man who refers to his 'English' or 'British' identity is not referring to his 'overall identity' as he may also think of himself as a father. Instead, he is referring to part of his identity or one of his identities, and either way he is referring to part of what he thinks he is.''[39] Uberoi shows that people are not defined by a single identity but rather by a combination of multiple identities. Bechhofer supports this claim through his finding that ''many people freely choose both English and British identities.''[40] This seemingly resolves the lack of ethnic representation present in the English national identity today, by suggesting

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[35] Ibid., p. 58-59.
[36] Ibid., p. 59.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Uberoi, Varun. "National Identity – A Multiculturalist's Approach." Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy 21, no. 1 (2017): 50. doi:10.1080/13698230.2017.1398475.
[40] Bechhofer, F., McCrone, D., & Palgrave Connect (Online service). (2009): 44. National identity, nationalism and constitutional change. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/978023023414

that a single identity is not enough to fully capture who a person is. When allowed the opportunity to choose both, people will say they are both British and English. When asked to pick one of two, either British or English, however, ethnic minorities in England are reluctant to pick the latter, and less likely to be accepted by ''white'' communities as such. It is therefore useful to try understand the difference between the two identities to determine why this is the case.

Moran and Bechhofer's analyses might together explain the difficulty immigrants face in trying to develop a sense of belonging within the English national identity, as well as the issues people surrounding immigrants face with accepting them as part of their community. The English national identity indeed seems to rely on boundaries of identity which assume shared cultural inheritance and experience, the key aspects of national identity that Moran has identified. Multiculturalism challenges this notion of unity; however, this appears to be the case only for Englishness and not for Britishness. This means there is an underlying difference between the two identities. It is therefore useful to distinguish the core aspects British and English identity differ in to explain why one identity is less affected by multiculturalism than the other. This in turn will explain the limitations of Englishness and why the identity causes some people, namely those of various ethnic backgrounds such as many immigrants like those in *Brick Lane*, to feel left out.

Bechhofer's article concludes that ''those who prioritise an English rather than a British identity are somewhat more likely to hold an exclusive attitude towards those who might be regarded as 'other'. It seems that English national identity is associated in the public mind with a less inclusive outlook on the world.''[41] At the start of the article, repeated once more in the concluding paragraph, Bechhofer suggests a reason for the difference between British and English identity, which relates back to history and government policies: ''The historical

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[41] Ibid., p. 61.

association of Britishness with a multicultural empire, together with its more recent promotion as a civic multicultural identity, has helped ensure that it appears better suited than English identity to provide a basis for community cohesion.''[42] One of the underlying elements promoting this inclusiveness is that ''being associated with, for example, pubs, Dickens and Shakespeare, Britishness is also said to embrace the Asian corner shop, Salman Rushdie, and Zadie Smith.''[43]

Hussain (2005) provides a more detailed explanation for the differences between British and English identity, and shows that the issue is more complex than it seems: ''National identity has been consistently defined by the far right in terms of White ethnic homogeneity and unity. But in doing so they construct barriers between Whites and 'others' by maintaining dichotomies in which Englishness continues to reproduce Blackness as its 'other'. This definition treats ethnicity as a major feature of British and English exclusivity.''[44] Yet, there is a fundamental difference in the way ethnicity is treated in British and English identity, which ties in with Bechhofer's study which found that people of ethnic backgrounds associate less with English identity than others, and more with Britishness. Bechhofer indeed showed that British and English identity are not equally inclusive concerning multiculturalism and ethnic representation. Using Moran's definition of national identity shows that in terms of shared values and experiences, British identity relies less on collectiveness compared to Englishness, and as such Britishness is favoured over Englishness as a national identity. Englishness adopts Moran's definition of national identity, whereas Britishness moves away from the idea that national identity is an experience reliant on shared values. Rather, ''if shared identity or Englishness is a matter of sharing some substantive beliefs and requires a common public culture, this seems to be lacking in Britain, which contains a high degree of pluralism. There is

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., p. 42.
[44] Hussain, Yasmin, and Paul Bagguley. "Citizenship, Ethnicity and Identity." Sociology 39, no. 3 (2005): 413. doi:10.1177/0038038505052493.

no common culture, first language, or robust set of values shared by British citizens, nor is there a shared way of life that could provide the basis for a shared national identity.''[45] It becomes clear that the difference between English and British identity lies in the extent to which either identity aims to uphold a sense of uniformity. Ironically enough, the difference shows that the more a national identity tries to unify people, as is the case with Englishness, the further society becomes divided. The more a national identity abides by the idea of a common culture, the less likely people of ethnic backgrounds will feel like they belong, as can be seen with characters in *Brick Lane*. Hussain's final remark perfectly captures this idea: ''This is a demand for recognition rather than integration. In this sense difference is to be accommodated within the idea of equal rights.''[46] Instead of trying to unifying all, national identity ought to celebrate diversity and give a voice to minorities.

The characters in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* are a few of the many voices, as the narratives in the novel reflect the current socio-cultural climate of England. *Brick Lane* therefore provides a suitable case study representing the issues which sociological writings on the topic of contemporary English and British cultural identity touch upon. Bechhofer (2009), Moran (2011) and Hussain (2005)'s research on this topic provide the basis for the theoretical framework through which I will be analysing Ali's novel. Combined, these articles contain key elements that influence the construction of cultural identity in England. In my close-reading of *Brick Lane* in chapters 2 and 3 I will reflect on a number of these elements as I highlight how cultural identity is constructed in *Brick Lane* through these components. I will argue that gender, religion, language and history are the main themes in *Brick Lane* alongside identity. In the process, I aim to answer the question as to how notions of belonging and cultural identity are represented in *Brick Lane*.

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[45] Hussain, Yasmin, and Paul Bagguley. "Citizenship, Ethnicity and Identity." Sociology 39, no. 3 (2005): 413-414. doi:10.1177/0038038505052493.
[46] Ibid., p. 421.

CHAPTER 2

CAPTIVITY VERSUS FREEDOM: CONSTRUCTING CULTURAL IDENTITY

THROUGH GENDER AND RELIGION IN *BRICK LANE*

In the following chapter I will discuss how elements of gender and religion have influence on the formation of cultural identity amongst the main characters in *Brick Lane*. A core distinction that can be found throughout the course of the story is the opposition of fate and agency, as well as captivity versus freedom. As I will demonstrate, it can be suggested that fate works as the main driving force withholding agency in some of the characters in the book. However, analysing the development of these main characters will show that, when fate and agency find balance, feelings of captivity gradually evolve into a sense of freedom. The main struggle characters face is trying to balance features that shape English identity, while upholding the tradition and culture from their native country. As Yousef (2019) argues, ''the ambivalent feelings the characters experience reflect an ambiguity that blurs the distinctions between the here and there, the homeland and the host country. This state of in-betweenness challenges the traditional understanding of what is authentic and what is peripheral. In the novel, social, political and cultural spaces overlap with geographical areas, thus problematizing the issue of cultural identity.''[47] One of the main characters in *Brick Lane*, Chanu, refers to this as the ''immigrant tragedy'', which he explains in the following quote: ''I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent.''[48] This quote is important because it captures the essence of the struggle every single character in *Brick Lane* faces, in many different aspects. Gender and religion are two of these aspects. Both are influenced by fate as

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[47] Yousef, Tawfiq. "Cultural Identity in Monica Ali's Brick Lane: A Bhabhian Perspective." International Journal of Arabic-English Studies 19, no. 1 (2019): 75. https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.19.1.4.
[48] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 113.

a whole, and the concept of dress runs through both themes as an element which overlaps gender and religion. My analyses will consist of a close-reading of *Brick Lane*, contextualized by sociological writings on national identity, multiculturalism, and ethnic pluralism, under which the papers mentioned in Chapter 1, including articles on Ali's novel.

Before I discuss my analysis of *Brick Lane*, I will briefly explore the main characters and general plot of the novel. I will start with Nazneen, who is the main protagonist of the story. She is born in Bangladesh and grows up convinced that God dictates her life and it is up to fate to decide what her future holds. Nazneen is shy and submissive, and reluctant to make her own choices as this goes against what she deems fate. Hasina is her younger sister, the second protagonist of the book. At the age of sixteen she enters into a love marriage with Malek, who becomes abusive towards her. She leaves him and finds work in a garment factory, where she meets Mr Chowdhury. She is fired due to a rumour about her sleeping with a co-worker, much to Mr Chowdhury's dismay, who rapes her when he finds out. Hasina eventually is taken into the care of Lovely and James, a rich couple who hire her as their house maid.

Hasina is a clear contrast to Nazneen, who at the age of eighteen is married off to Chanu and moves from Bangladesh to London where she continues to live for the rest of her life. When Nazneen first meets Chanu, he is working as a civil servant in London. He considers himself to be better than other Bangladeshi immigrants, and dislikes English society. He often refers back to his knowledge of history to praise his home country, Bangladesh. He is condescending towards Nazneen and prefers her to stay submissive and only do as she is asked. After one miscarriage, he and Nazneen have two daughters: Shahana and Bibi. Chanu's main goal in England is to make money and ultimately move back to Bangladesh with his wife and two daughters. Shahana is Nazneen and Chanu's oldest daughter. She is born in England and embraces British culture. She hates the idea of going back to Bangladesh with her parents and

runs away the night before they plan to leave. Bibi is Shahana's younger sister, who is not as outspoken as Shahana.

During her stay in London, Nazneen meets Karim. Karim is a pro-Islamic activist and founder of the Bengal Tigers, a group advocating Muslim rights. Karim is a Bangladeshi, but unlike Nazneen and her husband, he is born in England and considers it his home. Nazneen is attracted to Karim because of his free-spirited nature and she commits adultery by sleeping with him. In Nazneen's eyes, Karim is everything her husband is not. Chanu comes to terms with Nazneen's relationship with Karim but, ultimately, Karim turns from a free-spirited young man into a radicalized Muslim. Nazneen realizes that her love for Karim is based on her fantasies of him, and decides not to pursue their relationship further. Chanu eventually returns to England by himself, when him and Nazneen decide it is better if her and the daughters stay behind. Mrs. Islam is Nazneen's neighbour who knows everything about the residents in Tower Hamlets, which is the estate Nazneen and her family live. Mrs. Islam is a usurer, who lends Nazneen's family money, and asks lots of interest for the money she lends them. Chanu borrows money from her to buy himself a computer and to buy Nazneen a sewing machine. At the end of the novel, Nazneen stands up for herself and refuses to pay Mrs. Islam any more money, considering her debt has been long paid off. In London, Nazneen also meets Razia, who soon becomes her closest friend. Razia is a Bangladeshi immigrant like Nazneen. Her Union Jack sweatshirt seems to suit her better than a sari, she learns to speak English, and she is independent. Ultimately, she sets up a sewing business and helps Nazneen take control of her life too.

Gender in *Brick Lane* is one of the main factors determining a lack of freedom expressed by some characters in the novel. Nazneen, the main protagonist, is the most prevalent personification of someone held captive by religious belief. Nazneen's story arc is an embodiment of women's empowerment through notions of fate ultimately intertwining with

agency. As she navigates life through conflicting perspectives, her sense of self is challenged repeatedly. Reinventing identity is core to the plot of *Brick Lane*, and Deborah Fahy Bryceson et al. (2007) provide the following definition of identity to explain its fluidity: ''identity is the means by which individuals can act consistently and convincingly within multiple plot spaces and change in the process. The self is composite and – just because it is composite – it is malleable.''[49] Nazneen's story shows the struggle immigrants in England face trying to adopt a new national identity whilst maintaining the cultural identity features developed in their country of origin. Moving from Bangladesh to England, Nazneen is faced with western societal standards that clash with those of her native country. One of the most strikingly different elements of Nazneen's upbringing compared to her new western environment is the gender expectations as a result of societal values that Nazneen is accustomed to. In this chapter, I will therefore be discussing how cultural identity in *Brick Lane* is influenced by the role of gender in the context of fate. I will be discussing Nazneen's narrative alongside four other characters whose identities are shown to be influenced by gender.

At the start of Nazneen's life story, fate is what dictates her existence. She was brought to life as a result of what her mother deemed to be fate, and this aspect of her personal identity is something she never lets go of. Throughout the course of the book she often finds herself referring back to the story of how she was ''left to her fate'', reaffirming that ''Fighting against one's fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, or perhaps most times, it can be fatal.''[50] This belief controls the way she perceives herself as a woman in relation to her environment and more specifically in relation to the men in her life. The attitude of her husband Chanu, those of the men she meets at Karim's pro-Islamic meetings, as well as that of her own mother, all help to reinforce the idea that women are inferior to men. Their prejudices are rooted in the belief

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[49] Bryceson, Deborah Fahy, Judith Okely, Jonathan Webber, and Shirley Ardener. "Fashioning Gender and Ethnicity Across Cultures." *Identity and Networks*, (2007): 3.
[50] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 15.

that fate decides who gets to have a voice. In Bangladesh, when Nazneen was younger, her mother Rupban said to her: ''If God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men.''[51] What this quote suggests is that because Nazneen is not a man, her only strength is to endure her suffering. She has no right to object and is to do solely as is expected of her as a woman. When she asks her husband for permission to pursue education, he declines: ''You're going to be a mother. Will that not keep you busy enough? It's not so simple as that. Just go to college, like that.''[52] Santesso (2013) explains that Chanu ''by doing so literally silences Nazneen and reinforces her alienation by removing any possibility of public interaction outside of the immediate community. Ironically, the domestic sphere, which is traditionally characterised as feminine space, in this case becomes the site of empowerment for the male.''[53] This male dominance is furthermore expressed at the pro-Islamic meetings Karim hosts in London, some of which Nazneen attends after Karim invites her. The people joining the meetings call themselves the ''Bengal Tigers.'' The meetings are held to discuss what actions the Muslim community in London should undertake in order to bring attention to Muslim rights, as well as to protest against the anti-Islamic group, the ''Lion Hearts,'' who spread Islamophobic messages around the city. Some men at these Muslim meetings restrict Nazneen in her freedom to express herself and be independent: ''Sisters. What are you doing here anyway?''[54] The men suggest that women have no place in discussing important topics. Nazneen's agency is seemingly taken from her, as that is what Fate has decided for her.

Nazneen gradually realizes, however, that it is by her own choice that she does not take agency, by blindly relying on God to guide her through life. Her moment of realization can be captured in the following quote by Mrs. Islam, who says to her: ''God always gives a way. You

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[51] Ibid., p. 80.
[52] Ibid., p. 77.
[53] Santesso, Esra Mirze. "Rethinking Hybridity in Monica Ali's Brick Lane." *Disorientation: Muslim Identity in Contemporary Anglophone Literature*, 2013, 65. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137281722.0005.
[54] Ibid., p. 285.

just have to find it.''[55] Inspired by this, she later says: ''I will decide what to do. I will say what happens to me.''[56] What can be seen is that whilst holding onto her religion, Nazneen comes to terms with the power she holds as the influencer directing the course of her own life: ''God provided a way, and I found it.''[57] Fate and agency unite as Nazneen takes charge of the power that was always within her, but thus far weighed down by the gender expectations set for her by her religious surroundings such as her mother, husband, and the men at the Karim's meetings. What changes her perception of gender in relation to agency can be explained by a number of factors. Through minor acts of rebellion in her household, Nazneen slowly gains strength to be the independent woman she wants to be, inspired by the influences of the characters of Razia, Hasina, and her daughter Shahana.

Razia and Hasina are two women close to Nazneen who influence Nazneen's self-image through acts of female empowerment, independence, and rebellion. Their characters are influenced by gender expectations of their native country as well as those of England. Hopkins (2013) explains that ''researchers have addressed migrants' investment in identities associated with their country of origin and their current country. For example, Berry (1980) argued that some migrants may identify with the country of origin, the country of destination, neither or both.''[58] This balancing act is what the characters in *Brick Lane* personify. Bryceson (2007) states that: ''liberation, resistance, and autonomy are invested with gendered meaning.''[59] Both characters embody this fight and acquisition of freedom in different contexts. Both seek financial freedom; however, Razia's story takes place in England whereas Hasina's narrative is set in Bangladesh. Razia is Nazneen's friend who represents modern and western values, as

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[55] Ibid., p. 199.
[56] Ibid., p. 405.
[57] Ibid., p. 446.
[58] Hopkins, Nick, and Ronni Michelle Greenwood. "Hijab, Visibility and the Performance of Identity." European Journal of Social Psychology 43, no. 5 (2013): 2. doi:10.1002/ejsp.1955.
[59] Bryceson, Deborah Fahy, Judith Okely, Jonathan Webber, and Shirley Ardener. "Fashioning Gender and Ethnicity Across Cultures." *Identity and Networks*, (2007): 9.

is portrayed by the way she dresses. She starts out wearing a sari: ''It was the sari that looked strange on her.''[60] She moves on to wear trousers, however: ''Razia pulled down her headscarf. Now that she wore trousers, she sat like a man.''[61] Furthermore, she can be seen wearing a jumper with the Union Jack on the front: ''Since gaining her British passport she had acquired a sweatshirt with a large Union Jack printed on the front, and in a favourite combination paired it with brown elastic-waisted trousers.''[62] Her change in dress shows her association with British identity. Wearing trousers means independence and freedom, whereas she associates saris with Bangladesh and restriction: ''I don't need anyone. I live like the English.''[63] Razia develops her independence in an environment where fellow Bengalis judge her while at the same time she is influenced by western women and their customs. Inspired by English society, she has a job and is not afraid to voice her own opinions. Razia provides a clear contrast with Bangladeshi women around her, including Nazneen. As Mortada (2010) notes: ''because of her "British ways" and because she does not mould herself into the role of the typical housewife, the society abandons her.''[64] In essence, Razia is shamed for being ''too English.''

Nazneen's sister Hasina faces similar issues trying to gain independence in Bangladesh by working and pursuing a love relationship, as opposed to the arranged marriage that Nazneen is subjected to. Although Hasina is not an immigrant in England, her fight for freedom is inspired by what is deemed as Western values, and shows the judgement she receives by Bangladeshis who hold onto their traditional values instead. Both Hasina and Razia are an example of women's empowerment suffering under prejudices of traditional gender roles shaped by fate. In a letter to Nazneen, Hasina writes that she has been told: ''Why should you

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[60] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 27
[61] Ibid., p. 123
[62] Ibid., p. 188.
[63] Ibid., p. 358.
[64] Mortada, Syeda Samara. "The Notion of Women as Bearers of Culture in Monica Ali's Brick Lane." *BRAC University Journal* 7, no. 1, 2 (2010): 57.

work? If you work it looks bad. People will say – he cannot feed her''[65] Hasina's letters show the judgment Razia and Hasina suffer. Razia's conversation with Nazneen portrays similar issues: ''If I get a job, he will kill me. […] Jorina can get me a sewing job, but my husband will come to the factory and slaughter me like a lamb.''[66] Both women highlight the fact that gender expectations in Bangladesh differ to those in England, and those who change accordingly are shamed for it by immigrants around them. Mortada explains that ''women characters in this novel act as bearers to Bangladeshi culture through representing ethics and morality of their cultures.''[67] Not adhering to the expectations of their culture results in blame and rejection.[68] At the same time, those who uphold their traditions are shown to not fit in with the local culture, as the difference in dress highlights. This dichotomy shows the struggle immigrants in *Brick Lane* face in upholding their foreign values, while trying to adapt to local society.

Nazneen's daughter, Shahana, can be seen to struggle for similar reasons. Born in London, Shahana is a second-generation immigrant who is forced by her parents to adhere to strict clothing norms.[69] Shahana attempts to gain agency by wearing jeans and shorter dresses to express her own identity, which her father does not allow: ''He noticed Shahana's dress. She had hitched up her uniform at school so that it bloused over the belt and rode up towards her thigh. Without changing her expression, she began to inch it slowly downwards.''[70] Shahana expresses her discomfort with traditional dress in the following: ''She wanted to wear jeans. She hated her kameez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them.''[71] Shahana's feelings towards her kameez show that dress is an identifier to Shahana. Yousef (2019)

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[65] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 150.
[66] Ibid., p. 123.
[67] Mortada, Syeda Samara. "The Notion of Women as Bearers of Culture in Monica Ali's Brick Lane." *BRAC University Journal* 7, no. 1, 2 (2010): 56-57.
[68] Ibid., p. 58.
[69] I will further discuss the role of generational differences in chapter 3.
[70] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 208.
[71] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 180.

highlights that ''her choice of clothes becomes a physical manifestation of the in-between, the unstable and fragmented nature of her identity. The depiction of Shahana's shifts between jeans and shalwar kameez symbolizes the conflict between her traditional values at home and the public values of the London society.''[72] Her behaviour is explained by Hopkins (2013): ''Although older women typically viewed traditional 'Asian' dress (e.g. salwar kameez) as a sign of being a good Muslim, younger women often saw it as implying conformity with a particular cultural tradition that they wished to distance themselves from.''[73] Shahana similarly distances herself from her parents' tradition by means of clothing. Dress is one of Shahana's ways of taking agency over who she wants to be.

Though being raised in London, Shahana and her sister are expected to dress according to the norms set by their family brought up in a different culture. What makes this increasingly difficult is the gender expectations in England, where women can be seen wearing clothing that Shahana's Bangladeshi parents would never approve of. Huisman (2005) explains this struggle: ''Immigrant women's dress may come under special scrutiny from within the community as well as from outsiders. Tendencies are never absolute, and resettled migrants and refugees must assess what they stand to gain and what they stand to lose by either clinging to or adopting new ways of gendered dress.''[74] High heels, tight jeans, and short skirts are the norm when it comes to fashion in London. Not knowing any better than this, Shahana and Bibi want to fit in by adopting the style of dress they see women and girls around them wear. Huisman (2005) argues that ''dress holds different meanings for different groups. When people from one particular national or regional context migrate as a group, the audience changes, and they often encounter

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[72] Yousef, Tawfiq. "Cultural Identity in Monica Ali's Brick Lane: A Bhabhian Perspective." *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies* 19, no. 1 (2019): 81. https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.19.1.4.

[73] Hopkins, Nick, and Ronni Michelle Greenwood. "Hijab, Visibility and the Performance of Identity." European Journal of Social Psychology 43, no. 5 (2013): 2. doi:10.1002/ejsp.1955.

[74] Huisman, Kimberly, and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo. "Dress Matters: Change and Continuity in the Dress Practices of Bosnian Muslim Refugee Women." Gender & Society 19, no. 1 (2005): 46. doi:10.1177/0891243204269716.

radically different gendered forms of clothing used for self and group presentation. They may cling to their original dress; they may embrace new gendered dress standards.''[75] The reason Shahana and Bibi adopt the gendered dress standards they see in English society is because dress in the novel is equated with female power. This becomes apparent through the eyes of Nazneen as she observes an English woman in the streets: ''Her shiny black shoes had big gold buckles. Her clothes were rich. Solid. They were armour and her ringed fingers weapons.''[76] This shows that the female characters in *Brick Lane* perceive women in England as strong and independent, simply by the way they dress. When Nazneen describes the appearance of a different woman towards the end of the book she says: ''Her footsteps rang like declarations.''[77] Upon this observation, Nazneen imitates her. In essence, Razia and Hasina do the same. What can be concluded is that the above characters try to construct their identities in a way which mirrors women around them in order to live up to English gender expectations as a means of gaining agency and freedom.

Religion is another main element in *Brick Lane* which influences the formation of cultural identity. I have decided to focus next on Karim's narrative to demonstrate the influence of religion on society in *Brick Lane*, and the role of the individual within this society. Religion is an identity marker in the novel which the character of Karim seems to portray most in his story arc. I will include the aspect of dress in this chapter, as Karim's dress changes in a similar way his views on religion change. The Oldham Riots of 2001 and the 9/11 terrorist attacks form the context of the religious tensions present in *Brick Lane*, as I will elaborate on further in the following paragraph. Ethnic minorities in the story are indeed discriminated against more than they already were after these conflicts take place. Religion in the novel shows characters being shaped by their beliefs: some characters consequently become isolated from society,

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[75] Ibid., p. 45.
[76] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 56.
[77] Ibid., p. 448.

whereas others gain more freedom. Due to this opposition it is relevant to discuss religion in relation to issues of belonging and assimilation in *Brick Lane*, in order to define how cultural identity is constructed and experienced by the novels' characters. I will first highlight the influence of religious tensions in the novel on the construction of cultural identity for the character of Karim, after which I will compare Karim and Nazneen's character progression in relation to religion.

Karim's story arc is an example of how religion can function as a personal identifier. Karim is a young and rebellious Muslim man whose behaviour fuels Nazneen's desire to take control of her life. His narrative shows what happens when groups in society become segregated due to religious conflict. The religious conflicts framing the narrative in *Brick Lane* are the urban riots of 2001 and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The 2001 urban riots in London were a series of ethnically-motivated riots, which saw ethnic conflicts in Bradford, Leeds, Burnley and Oldham.[78] The riots were highly violent and led to the use of petrol bombs, bricks, and other projectiles by Asian youths who set out to protest against discrimination of working-class Asians.[79] The youths rebelled against white racist threat and violence, which in *Brick Lane* are personified by the ''Lion Hearts'' group. Karim is a member of an Islamic group who fights for Muslim rights, which later becomes known as the ''Bengal Tigers.'' Islamophobia has been present in Karim's society before the actual conflicts take place, as leaflets spread by the Lion Hearts group show: ''The Islamification of our neighbourhood has gone too far. […] How long before the extremists are putting veils on our women and insulting our daughters for wearing short skirts? Do not tolerate it! Write to the council! This is England!''[80] Tensions in London become however especially heightened following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York. Although they did not affect England directly, society becomes more hostile against Muslims

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[78] Amin, Ash. "Unruly Strangers? The 2001 Urban Riots in Britain." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27, no. 2 (2003): 460. doi:10.1111/1468-2427.00459.
[79] Ibid., p. 461.
[80] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 257.

in the local area nonetheless: ''A pinch of New York dust blew across the ocean and settled on Dogwood Estate. Sorupa's daughter was the first, but not the only one. Walking in the street, on her way to college, she had her hijab pulled off. Razia wore her Union Jack sweatshirt and it was spat on.''[81] Notably, the assaults are targeted at dress, suggesting the associations of religion are with clothing.

Inspired by riots in Oldham, Karim's group decides to come together to rebel against the hate which Islam is receiving from white residents in the area as a result of the 9/11 tensions. The idea which captures their motifs best, is: ''Think global, but act local.''[82] This globalised world view is explained by Jacobson (2010): ''ethnicity relates to a particular place and its people, Islam has universal relevance.''[83] Nazroo and Karlsen (2015) furthermore add that ''Muslims do not perceive birthplace as producing the same restrictions on social integration, as a consequence of a perception of their place in a global Muslim community, or Ummah.''[84] Karim, and fellow Muslims in *Brick Lane*, find validation and recognition in being member of a religious group which traverses country borders. Religion is therefore seen as a cultural identifier which surpasses citizenship. Rather than associating with Englishness, Karim and his group identify with being Muslim first and foremost: ''Karim did not have his place in the world. That's why he defended it.''[85] A reason for this is given by Carlsen and Nazroo (2015), who state that the issue lays in government policies emphasizing differences rather than similarities between cultures: ''indeed, rather than current debates simply seeking to clarify a pre-existing Britishness accessible to all, there is evidence that 'Britishness' has in fact been reinvented in direct response to this perceived 'Muslim threat' leading to an exaggeration of

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[81] Ibid., p. 368.
[82] Ibid., p. 287.
[83] Jacobson, Jessica. "Religion and Ethnicity: Dual and Alternative Sources of Identity among Young British Pakistanis." Ethnic and Racial Studies 20, no. 2 (1997): 1. doi:10.1080/01419870.1997.9993960.
[84] Karlsen, Saffron, and James Y. Nazroo. "Ethnic and Religious Differences in the Attitudes of People towards Being 'British'." The Sociological Review 63, no. 4 (2015): 775. doi:10.1111/1467-954x.12313.
[85] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 448-449.

the sense of incompatibility between Islamic and British identities.''[86] The sentiment radicalizes the more hate the Bengal Tigers group receives from non-Muslims. They justify their radical behaviour by saying: ''Islam is a peaceful religion.''[87] Hamdan (2019) argues that ''As Islam begins to be associated with terrorism, and widespread ignorance gives rise to popular images of a fixed set of beliefs, promoting oppression and violence over those of freedom and equality, Ali sets to challenge these misconceived stereotyped images to present young people who are angry not because they are mythically fanatic and incomprehensively hateful of the West, but as being desperately reacting to their uneven position in society.''[88] To Karim, and the Bengal Tigers, violence is the way to fight oppression and social inequality. In religion, Karim finds his identity and purpose.

What can be seen in Karim is a shift of character which interestingly enough develops in the reverse of Nazneen, Razia, Hasina and Shahana's identity progression. At the start of the novel, Karim is described as someone who has integrated in English society, as can be seen by the way he dresses and speaks.[89] Karim is first introduced to the reader, wearing Western clothing: ''He wore his jeans tight and his shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbow. […] No clue to the glitches in his Bengali voice.''[90] His attitude can be described as being quite free-spirited, and after Nazneen sleeps with him she describes him as follows: ''It was as if the conflagration of her bouts with Karim had cast a special light on everything, a dawn light after a life lived in twilight.''[91] It can be seen that Karim gives Nazneen a sense of freedom. At the same point in time, Nazneen, however, feels trapped in her own body and capabilities: ''The next instant she

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[86] Karlsen, Saffron, and James Y. Nazroo. "Ethnic and Religious Differences in the Attitudes of People towards Being 'British'." The Sociological Review 63, no. 4 (2015): 761. doi:10.1111/1467-954x.12313.

[87] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 414.

[88] Hamdan, Siham Hattab. "The Status of Bangladeshi Immigrant Women and the Consequences of the Attacks of 9/11 in Monica Alis Brick Lane." 0 لارك, no. 27 (March 2019): 11. https://doi.org/10.31185/lark.vol0.iss27.393.

[89] The role of language will be reserved for Chapter 3 where I will consider its influence on other characters next to the ones mentioned so far.

[90] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 210.

[91] Ibid., p. 301.

was seized by panic and clawed the silk away as if it were strangling her. She could not breathe. The sari, which seconds ago had felt light as air, became heavy as chains.''[92] Her restriction is expressed by means of her dress. Nazneen does not speak up for herself and acts the way she is taught that a woman should, according to the standard for women in Bangladesh. Her value is measured by how good of a wife she is to her husband Chanu: ''Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children. […] What's more, she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that.''[93]

What can be seen is that Karim becomes increasingly isolated, while Nazneen opens herself up to the world. Unlike Nazneen, Karim alters the way he dresses completely as his ideas on religion radicalize. As Karim becomes more involved with the local pro-Islamic meetings he hosts as time goes on, he starts to dress accordingly, adding pieces of religious attire over time. Ultimately, he fully adopts religious clothing as he abandons his Western looks: ''Karim had a new style. The gold necklace vanished; the jeans, shirts and trainers went as well. Some of the parents were telling their daughters to leave their headscarves at home. Karim put on Panjabi-pyjama and a skullcap.''[94] As Hopkins (2013) explains, Karim changing his clothing can be a result of him trying to ''make his Muslim identity visible''[95], which can be ''associated with ambitions to exert control over one's categorisation.''[96] Karim hereby categorizes himself as Muslim. Contrarily, Nazneen starts depending less on faith and religion as she takes fate into her own hands. A key point for Nazneen in this reversal is the moment she realizes: ''If she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well. […] For a glorious moment it was clear that clothes, not fate, had made her life. And if that moment lasted

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[92] Ibid., p. 277
[93] Ibid., p. 23.
[94] Ibid., p. 376.
[95] Hopkins, Nick, and Ronni Michelle Greenwood. "Hijab, Visibility and the Performance of Identity."
European Journal of Social Psychology 43, no. 5 (2013): 5. doi:10.1002/ejsp.1955.
[96] Ibid.

she would have ripped her sari off and torn it to shreds.''[97] Bryceson notes that: ''gender politics are at the centre of Islamist movements, where women assume the onerous burden of a largely male-defined tradition and are cast as the embodiment of cultural identity and the custodians of cultural values.''[98] This concept ties in with the idea that gender can function as an identity marker, as chapter 2 highlights. Nazneen wanting to rip off her sari can therefore be interpreted as a sign of her unconsciously liberating herself from traditional religious standards. Santesso (2013) rightfully highlights, however, that: ''Women's movements in immigrant communities cannot be reduced to the symbolic act of throwing away hijab or rebelling against their husbands. None of these acts are meaningful unless the women themselves learn to acquire an agency which can allow them to function in both worlds.''[99] In line with this idea, the way Nazneen dresses ultimately remains the same, but her connotations of it do change. Through her dress she embraces western standards alongside her traditional values. As much as Nazneen adopts western values such as voicing her opinion, being financially independent, and eventually divorcing her husband and raising her kids by herself, she continues to wear her sari. Her dress has come to symbolize her freedom of choice, rather than a restrictive element imposed on her by fate. As Santesso (2013) concludes, ''for Ali, Westernisation is not an inevitable process, the inescapable end point of every "immigrant" novel.''[100] The unification of tradition and modernity, as opposed to total Westernisation, can be captured in the closing lines of the book, when Nazneen says: ''But you can't skate in a sari,''[101] to which Razia answers: ''This is England. You can do whatever you like.''[102]

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[97] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p 278.

[98] Bryceson, Deborah Fahy, Judith Okely, Jonathan Webber, and Shirley Ardener. "Fashioning Gender and Ethnicity Across Cultures." *Identity and Networks*, (2007): 9.

[99] Santesso, Esra Mirze. "Rethinking Hybridity in Monica Ali's Brick Lane." Disorientation: Muslim Identity in Contemporary Anglophone Literature, 2013, 69. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137281722.0005.

[100] Santesso, Esra Mirze. "Rethinking Hybridity in Monica Ali's Brick Lane." Disorientation: Muslim Identity in Contemporary Anglophone Literature, 2013, 69. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137281722.0005.

[101] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p 492.

[102] Ibid.

It becomes clear that Karim and Nazneen's story arc contradict each other in the way each character's identity is influenced by religion. Whereas Karim becomes increasingly isolated, Nazneen gains freedom in unifying traditional values of her birth country with those of her current place of residence. There is a parallel that exists between the two, however, as both characters are on a journey to find a place within their community: Karim finds his identity in religion, whereas Nazneen finds hers in the fusion of traditional and modern values. Razia, Hasina and Shahana find their identity in their rebellion against traditional gender norms. Associations with certain modes of dress and financial independence gives these characters a voice, one that unifies agency and fate.

CHAPTER 3

BIRTHPLACE AND A SENSE OF HOME: CONSTRUCTING CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH LANGUAGE AND HISTORY IN *BRICK LANE*

In the following chapter I will continue my analysis of *Brick Lane* by considering the influence of birthplace on the formation of cultural identity for the characters in Monica Ali's novel. Alongside the elements of gender and religion, birthplace affects what and who characters identify with. Language, race, and views on history typically correlate with where a person is born: someone born in England generally speaks English and statistics furthermore show that in 2001, 91% of the total population in the UK was considered to be white, compared to 85% in 2011.[103] It can therefore be concluded that it is likely for a person who is born in England to be white. Moreover, a person born in England generally has a perception of history which is formed by English education. After all, a person's view on history depends on what books they read and how their particular history classes cover certain historical topics. The standards for

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[103] Lymperopoulou, Kitty, Nissa Finney, and Gemma Catney. "Local Ethnic Inequalities and Ethnic Minority Concentration in England and Wales, 2001–11." The Routledge Handbook of Census Resources, Methods and Applications, 2017, 261-76. doi:10.4324/9781315564777-20.

history teaching in England will therefore differ to those in The Netherlands, or any other country. This also applies to language: which language a person speaks is influenced by the language of instruction of the education one pursues. As education in England typically employs the English language, children are taught English from a very young age. The effect birthplace has on how a person experiences language and history is easy to overlook until one takes into account the generational differences between first-generation immigrant parents and their second-generation immigrant children. This generational gap is a prevalent issue in *Brick Lane*, as can be observed between Shahana and her parents. Nazneen and Chanu are first-generation immigrants, meaning they were born in a different country to where they live. In their case, they were born in Bangladesh and moved to England, where they live for the majority of the novel's duration. Shahana, however, was born in England, although her parents were born in Bangladesh. This makes her a second-generation immigrant. Shahana and her parents experience life in England differently due to this contrast in upbringing. The main contrasts can be found in how each of the characters treat language and history in relation to their cultural identity. In this chapter I will therefore discuss the generational differences that can be found in the construction of cultural identity, in relation to language and history in *Brick Lane*. As was the case for chapter 2, agency plays a role in the way these elements shape each of the characters.

Language, more specifically the English language, functions as a personal identity marker for most characters in *Brick Lane*. This happens in a number of different ways: language either empowers and liberates characters, or limits, or distances them. I will start out by discussing the role of language in the formation of identity for Shahana and Chanu, as these characters contrast each other in how language influences their identity. Shahana gains agency by adopting the English language as a way to identify with England. To Shahana, speaking English is a way for her to identify with Englishness. In a similar way she does with the clothes

she chooses to wear, as I showed in my previous chapter, Shahana uses language to distance herself from Bengali culture: ''Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking.''[104] A reason for this is given by Hussain (2005), whose work shapes the theoretical basis for this thesis. As Hussain explains, ''the citizenship identities of the first generation are interwoven with their experience of migration, settlement and language. The acquisition of the English language is something which they may not have accessed fully, but for the second generation it provides a means of upward mobility.''[105] What this means for Shahana is that speaking English allows her to be independent as a member of English society, more so than her parents: ''language gives them the link to British social institutions and an access to a British identity of citizenship that their parents lack.''[106] What is important to note here is the emphasis on citizenship in both quotes. Between Shahana and her parents there is an inherent difference which changes the way their cultural identity develops. This difference lies in the way home is perceived, as a result of birthplace. Shahana is born in England, whereas her parents are not.

Consequently, Chanu's sense of home seems to differ to that of his family, and especially Shahana. Chanu lacks a sense of belonging in England due to birthplace, as Hussain explains: ''British-Pakistani people's citizenship identities and claims are diverse and not uniform; in particular they vary between first-generation migrants and those born here. The first generation still speak as if they are visitors, as temporary economic migrants. The second generation 'belong' through their place of birth.''[107] Shahana views England to be her home rather than Bangladesh and reinforces this feeling by speaking English instead of Bengali. Whereas Shahana speaks English as a means to identify with Englishness, Chanu rejects the

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[104] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 178
[105] Hussain, Yasmin, and Paul Bagguley. "Citizenship, Ethnicity and Identity." *Sociology* 39, no. 3 (2005): 418. doi:10.1177/0038038505052493.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid., p. 420.

language as a protest against English identity and perhaps society. Shahana says: ''I didn't ask to be born here,''[108] referring to the struggle she faces as a child of first-generation immigrants, born in a different country to her parents. Had she, like her parents, been born in Bangladesh, she would not have to face the dilemma of choosing what language she speaks at home. The reason this issue exists in the first place is because her father Chanu refuses to associate with the English language in order to distance himself from English society. He tries to distance his family too, which in their household means that his daughters are only allowed to speak Bengali: ''We are not allowed to speak English in this house,' said Shahana.''[109] Chakravorty (2012) argues that for Chanu ''Bengali is the language of home, and English is the language of the world. […] Nazneen wants to go to college to learn to speak English, but Chanu's reaction betrays a fear of the other things she might learn: sociality outside of the home, enjoyment of English activities, independent employment, and so forth. To speak English in some sense is to be English.''[110] Chanu's fear shows in the following quote: ''Nazneen saw him and saw that he was not just baffled but afraid.''[111] His worry lies in the fact that he feels as though he is losing his daughters to English society. The underlying reason for his concern is that he does not consider England to be his home, and he believes that neither should his family. Chanu addresses the situation for immigrants like himself, comparing his stay to that of the English during colonial times: ''You see, when the English went to our country, they did not go to stay. They went to make money, and the money they made, they took it out of the country. They never left home. Mentally. Just taking money out. And that is what I am doing now. What else

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[108] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p 181
[109] Ibid., p. 193
[110] Chakravorty, Mrinalini. "Brick Lane Blockades: The Bioculturalism of Migrant Domesticity." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 58, no. 3 (2012): 511. doi:10.1353/mfs.2012.0053.
[111] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 203.

can you do?''[112] As becomes clear through this quote, Chanu sees himself as an outsider, a visitor, a temporary economic migrant.[113]

This sense of history is another important element that influences the perception of home for characters in *Brick Lane*. This is primarily the case for Chanu, whose sense of home differs to that of his family mainly because his perception of England and Bangladesh relies heavily on the past. The following is an example of this: ''It was the British, of course, who destroyed our textile industry. […] The Dhaka looms were sacrificed so that the mills of Manchester could be born.''[114] Chanu furthermore adds: ''While the crows and vultures stripped our bones, the British, our rulers, exported grain from the country.''[115] Both quotes capture Chanu's perception of Britain, which correlates to its colonial history. His views of Bangladesh are expressed in the following: ''Who was it who saved the work of Plato and Aristotle for the West during the Dark Ages? Us. It was us. The Muslims. We saved the work so that your so-called Saint Thomas could claim it for his own discovery?''[116] Chanu's cultural identity is shaped according to what England and Bangladesh once used to be.

Smeekes and Verkuyten (2015) provide an explanation for the way Chanu sees himself in relation to England. Referring to DeVos (1995), Smeekes and Verkuyten note that ''without the ability to recall our past we are not able to understand who we are in the present. This applies not only to our personal identities but also to identities that we derive from membership in groups in which a past orientation is identity defining. Whereas there are groups that are more present oriented, such as professional groups, and groups that have a focus on the future, such as ideological and revolutionary movements, ethnic groups tend to be strongly past

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[112] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 214.
[113] Hussain, Yasmin, and Paul Bagguley. "Citizenship, Ethnicity and Identity." Sociology 39, no. 3 (2005): 420. doi:10.1177/0038038505052493.
[114] Ibid., p. 316.
[115] Ibid., p. 370.
[116] Ibid., p. 215.

oriented.''[117] Chanu lives by this idea, and referring to the history of Bangladesh he says: ''These are our roots. […] If you have history, you see, you have pride.''[118] He continues: ''A loss of pride is a terrible thing.''[119] Although there is great significance in recalling the past, Chanu seems to hold British people in his direct environment responsible for what ancestors in the past did to the people in Bangladesh. Furthermore, Roupakia (2016) adds that he ''feels misrepresented by the English and misunderstood by his daughters. He launches a bitter attack against the British education his daughters receive at school, railing against western historiography's use of the term "Dark Ages", which he believes is racist and an intentional falsification of historical truth.''[120] Smeekes and Maykel explain that ''ethnicity is a form of collective identity that is firmly rooted in history hereby providing people with a sense of identity continuity and temporal depth.''[121] Chanu essentially continues history through his identity. Perhaps this is why he is unable to separate England's colonial history from the present, and can therefore never feel as though he is at home in England.

Shahana's narrative is similar to that of Karim, who ties his birthplace to where he feels at home. Like Shahana, Karim is a second-generation immigrant who was born in England. He associates himself with England through speaking English: ''It was a strange thing, and it took her some time to realize it. When he spoke in Bengali he stammered. In English, he found his voice and it gave him no trouble. […] There was nothing there. No clue to the glitches in his Bengali voice.''[122] The quote suggests that English gives Karim a voice in the literal sense but also figuratively. As is the case for Shahana, English provides Karim a means of upward

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[117] Smeekes, Anouk, and Maykel Verkuyten. "The Presence of the Past: Identity Continuity and Group Dynamics." *European Review of Social Psychology* 26, no. 1 (2015): 163. doi:10.1080/10463283.2015.1112653.

[118] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 185.

[119] Ibid., p. 187.

[120] Roupakia, Lydia Efthymia. "Cosmopolitanism, Religion and Ethics: Rereading Monica Ali's Brick Lane." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 52, no. 6 (2016): 650. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2016.1165278.

[121] Smeekes, Anouk, and Maykel Verkuyten. "The Presence of the Past: Identity Continuity and Group Dynamics." *European Review of Social Psychology* 26, no. 1 (2015): 163. doi:10.1080/10463283.2015.1112653.

[122] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p. 210

mobility. One of the respondents in Hussain's research notes that ''a lot of people before did not have the education or the language to let their voice be heard but now the youngsters, they were born in Britain. They are aware of the law, the education scheme and the language as well. They are able to speak English and present their cases.''[123] The fact that Karim is able to speak English means he is in a position to stand up for his rights, which he does in the form of protests. Speaking English is a reason why his religious protests have significance. It is a tool for him to connect to the society he is in. Hussain explains that respondents in her research ''emphasized the significance to them of their birth in Britain and how that shaped both their identities as citizens, and how they felt about where they belonged, in comparison to the identities and feelings of national belonging among their parents who saw themselves as 'outsiders'.''[124] This generational contrast becomes clear when Karim is compared to Nazneen.

When Nazneen first moves to London, she experiences a sense of restriction and exclusion: she ''began to be aware of herself, without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination.''[125] Santesso (2013) describes this experience as a moment of disassociation: ''imagining how others perceive her generates an inferiority complex, an obsession with her racial and religious Otherness. Her difference ("without a suit") visibly sets her apart from the regular, normalised crowd. Nazneen understands that she is an outsider, who can watch her surroundings, but not participate in them.''[126] To furthermore capture her sense of Otherness, Nazneen compares herself to ''a maharani in her enclosure.''[127] Simultaneously, ''Nazneen could only say two things in English: sorry and thank you.''[128] These quotes together draw a line between racism and language, which Hussain explains: ''Skin colour and physical

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[123] Hussain, Yasmin, and Paul Bagguley. "Citizenship, Ethnicity and Identity." Sociology 39, no. 3 (2005): 418. doi:10.1177/0038038505052493.
[124] Hussain, Yasmin, and Paul Bagguley. "Citizenship, Ethnicity and Identity." Sociology 39, no. 3 (2005): 419. doi:10.1177/0038038505052493.
[125] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p 56
[126] Santesso, Esra Mirze. "Rethinking Hybridity in Monica Ali's Brick Lane." Disorientation: Muslim Identity in Contemporary Anglophone Literature, 2013, 63. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137281722.0005.
[127] Ibid., p. 58.
[128] Ibid., p. 19.

characteristics are not the only means of identifying difference: lack of fluency in English can also give rise to racism and negative stereotyping. These attributes become a means of separating 'the alien' from 'the mainstream', encouraging social conformity and invisibility, loss of self-respect and feelings of insecurity.''[129] Nazneen's physical characteristics mirror her lack of English fluency, as Pereira-Ares (2013) explains: ''In a novel in which the protagonist's (Nazneen) knowledge of English is limited, dress becomes an alternative system of communication for her and, by extension, for the reader who more often than not perceives the fictional reality of the novel through Nazneen's eyes. In Brick Lane clothes bespeak gender, class, and ethnic differences as well as the potential ideological affiliations of the characters.''[130] Nazneen's lack of language fluency, often expressed through her dress, alienates her from English society. This sense of Otherness is a reason Nazneen struggles to assimilate in England. Similarly, it explains why Chanu never finds his place in English society and ends up moving back to Bangladesh, where he feels at home. As Yousef (2019) argues: ''Chanu's story, contrary to Nazneen's story, demonstrates how living between two cultures can lead to marginalization and ultimately to a sense of disconnection and alienation from one culture and an extreme sense of belonging to another one.''[131]

The key difference between Nazneen and Chanu is Nazneen's willingness to adapt: ''The overlapping of identities characteristic of the diasporic experience as treated in Brick Lane leads to cultural hybridity. Nazneen's identity cannot be categorized as being exclusively British or entirely Bengali. Relying on a negotiation of difference, hybridity brings into contrast the narratives of home and host culture. Hybridity includes a sense of contentment with the

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[129] Hussain, Yasmin, and Paul Bagguley. "Citizenship, Ethnicity and Identity." Sociology 39, no. 3 (2005): 418. doi:10.1177/0038038505052493.

[130] Pereira-Ares, Noemí. "The Politics of Hijab in Monica Ali's Brick Lane." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48, no. 2 (2013): 205. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989412474852.

[131] Yousef, Tawfiq. "Cultural Identity in Monica Ali's Brick Lane: A Bhabhian Perspective." *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies* 19, no. 1 (2019): 80. https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.19.1.4.

original culture and a desire to assimilate elements from the new culture, leading to the displacement of old values and the adapting to the new surroundings.''[132] Whereas Chanu sees hybridity as a tragedy, Nazneen experiences it as an opportunity for personal growth and gaining agency. As Pereira-Ares argues, the multicultural society suggested in the closing lines of *Brick Lane* ''is based on the coexistence, interchange, and creative engagement between Western and Eastern cultural forms on the part of both the minority and the majority community, without this implying the blurring of cultural differences.''[133] Unlike her husband, Nazneen allows two cultures to intertwine, and supports her daughters' hybrid identities: ''When Chanu went out the girls frequently switched languages. Nazneen let it pass. Perhaps even encouraged it.''[134] Instead of and making them choose between two identities, Nazneen embraces her daughters identifying with both. Referring to the 2001 riots in England, Chakravorty (2012) notes that ''despite calls from immigrant groups to recognize the overt issues of race, the government responded by proposing heightened regulations on English language fluency.'' She furthermore states that ''in the year following the riots, legislation was proposed in the British Parliament to mandate language testing for immigrants entering the United Kingdom. Home Secretary David Blunkett, in response to the series of race riots during the summer of 2001, urged ethnic minorities to develop a "sense of belonging" in Britain so that "future generations may grow up 'feeling British'.''[135] What can be concluded from these quotes is that learning English, according to British legislation, is essential to developing a sense of belonging in England. This in turn partially explains why Nazneen and her two daughters find their place in England, whereas Chanu does not.

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[132] Yousef, Tawfiq. "Cultural Identity in Monica Ali's Brick Lane: A Bhabhian Perspective." *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies* 19, no. 1 (2019): 77-78. https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.19.1.4.

[133] Pereira-Ares, Noemí. "The Politics of Hijab in Monica Ali's Brick Lane." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48, no. 2 (2013): 215. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989412474852.

[134] Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2004. p 194

[135] Chakravorty, Mrinalini. "Brick Lane Blockades: The Bioculturalism of Migrant Domesticity." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 58, no. 3 (2012): 512. doi:10.1353/mfs.2012.0053.

All in all, there are clear generational differences in the way characters in *Brick Lane* approach language and history in relation to their cultural identity. Shahana and Karim, second-generation immigrants, develop a sense of home in England through speaking the English language. Chanu, a first-generation immigrant, refuses to associate with British society and therefore limits himself to Bengali. For the younger generation, language is a tool to gain upward mobility in society. For the older generation, however, language is a boundary which restricts the extent to which they can assimilate. The exclusion felt by second generation immigrants is primarily portrayed through the character of Nazneen. Analysing her story arc allows readers to see a parallel between racism and English fluency. English legislation has therefore targeted English language education for immigrants, although protests such as the ones Karim is involved in have focused on issues of race. Interestingly enough, as Nazneen's story arc reflects, race and language are not opposites, but rather tied together. To Karim, and to second-generation immigrants in England he portrays, it is language which helps raise awareness to issues of race.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* unravels the complex ways in which its characters construct cultural identity. Over the course of this thesis I have tried to shed light on the processes that immigrants in England undergo when trying to assimilate in their host-country by researching how these processes are portrayed in a case study of contemporary fiction. My aim has been to tie in the narratives of characters in *Brick Lane* with real life experiences from respondents who are interviewed in the theories I employed to support my claims. My theoretical framework in chapter 1 likewise served as context to chapter 2 and 3 of my research. In these chapters I have highlighted the ways in which *Brick Lane* tells the story of first- and second-generation immigrants and the issues they face. These issues incorporated elements of gender, religion, birthplace, language and history. As I have argued, these elements are key to the development of cultural identity for characters in *Brick Lane*. What characterizes the main protagonists is how their identity is rooted in the balancing of two cultures, namely those of England and Bangladesh. As Hopkins (2013) showed, this is typical for immigrants.

Gender and religion are the elements I focused on in chapter 2, which are often expressed through dress. In terms of gender, fate is what withholds agency for some characters in the novel. Gender inhibits freedom for the characters of Nazneen, Shahana, Razia and Hasina. This is mainly due to different gender expectations set by the host- and home-country of the characters. What can be seen is that women in *Brick Lane* mirror women in their direct environment, England, in order to assimilate in society and thereby gain agency, which Hopkins (2013) explains. Religion can furthermore be considered a primary source of cultural identity in the novel, which Karim's narrative best captures. Framed by the 2001 urban riots in London and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, which Amin (2003) elaborates on, Karim's narrative shows what the effects of religion on a global scale are for individuals. Key to this is group membership and developing a sense of belonging within a community, as research by

Nazroo and Karlsen (2015) and Jacobson (2010) highlight. Karim's story arc exemplifies that group membership, particularly in the context of religion in *Brick Lane*, can both isolate and unify.

In chapter 3 I discussed the influence of birthplace on cultural identity in *Brick Lane*. As I argued, language and historical viewpoints are both influenced by birthplace, as characters in Monica Ali's work demonstrate. The generational gap between first- and second-generation immigrants in the novel is the primary cause for the different ways in which each group associates with language and history in relation to their cultural identity. What can be concluded from chapter 3 is that some characters reject the influences of British society, as the character of Chanu shows through his refusal to speak English. This behaviour corresponds with the findings of Chakravorty (2012). History furthermore influences his perception of home, as Smeekes and Verkuyten (2015) explain. Because of his view on history, Chanu struggles to associate with England. Other characters, however, embrace and adopt English identity, and as such the English language, as much as possible. As research by Hussain (2005) demonstrates, education has made it possible for second-generation immigrants, like Shahana and Karim, to gain upward mobility. By virtue of their birthplace these characters differ to the first-generation immigrants, such as Nazneen, who experience exclusion due to their lack of English fluency. Racism and language fluency therefore go hand in hand, as Hussain (2005) elaborates on. Yet, they are often counterposed, as English legislation after the London riots demonstrates. With the emphasis on language learning, English policies have targeted immigrant assimilation. However, what became clear through my analysis of *Brick Lane,* in accordance with theories on immigrant cultural identity, struggles in England still remain. More specifically, my study of *Brick Lane* highlights that immigrants experience difficulties constructing a cultural identity in England.

Further research could therefore be done on how the assimilation of immigrants is represented in literature. Such studies may highlight the case of England, as this thesis has set out to do. Similar research could, however, also be applied to literature concerning the situation of countries outside of the United Kingdom. Research such as Moran (2010) could initiate such study. Moran discusses ''the relationship between multiculturalism and identity, focusing on the Australian context.''[136] Perhaps, looking at how cultural identity in different countries around the world is represented in literature could bring new insights into the way immigrant assimilation is best accomplished. Furthermore, it could be interesting to analyse and compare other works of Monica Ali to *Brick Lane.* In 2009 Ali published her third novel *In the Kitchen,* which is seen by many as the ''follow-up'' to *Brick Lane.* Similar to *Brick Lane*, this novel deals with issues of national identity, as well as race and culture. *In the Kitchen* provides a different point of view to the situation of immigrants in *Brick Lane.* The main character in *In the Kitchen* is English and living in London, but struggles with constructing a cultural identity for himself: he does not know his place within his environment, which mainly consists of immigrants. Comparing and contrasting Ali's works, and those of other authors, may contribute to understanding the difficulties ethnic minorities face in England. This could in turn aid the development of government policies which support tolerance towards diversity. Perhaps then, future literature will lend itself to celebrating multiculturalism, rather than highlighting differences.

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[136] Moran, Anthony. "Multiculturalism as Nation-building in Australia: Inclusive National Identity and the Embrace of Diversity." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 12 (2011): 2153. doi:10.1080/01419870.2011.573081.

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