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SAMENESS WITHIN DIFFERENCE OR DIFFERENCE WITHIN SAMENESS?

Abstract: In the era of globalisation and the emergence of multicultural societies the significant issue of who we should become arises. Modern cultural as well as literary models of merging cultural characteristics advocate a vision of overall uniqueness, thus contributing to the creation of a unified, yet diversified world community. The following article concentrates on the motivation of the process of assimilation observed in migrants, which is identified by implementing Rene Girard's theory of the triangle of desire and Levinas' hypothesis of the face-to-face encounter. The presented analysis is based on the liaison between characters created by Monica Ali in her novel *Brick Lane*. Moreover, it points to the role of silence as a tool for the superficial preservation of the desired image.

Key words: identity formation, desire, difference, sameness.

Worldwide and multidimensional, the end of the colonial era can be regarded as a stepping stone towards multiculturalism and globalization, as the observable increase in the number of occurring migratory movements has greatly contributed to the phenomenon of cultural overlapping and mixing. This process, however, has given rise to the much more pressing issue of who the citizens of the new order are, or ought to be. Modern cultural as well as literary models, in particular those presented by sociologists Dion (1998), Healey (2013), Berry (2005) and literary critic Nayar (2008) in their most recent works, advocate a vision of overall diversity, which is achieved by merging novel characteristics within a single space or even being, thus contributing to the creation of a mixed, yet homogenous world society inhabited by the citizen of the world. The presented term is applicable to every individual who due to the processes of acculturation as well as assimilation retains numerous social strains from a number of different cultures, thus becoming a completely adaptable being, mentally residing in-between these cultures. The

origins of the expression are traced back to the mid-1940s when the concept of the immigrant as well as cultural identity had just been emerging thanks to the works of Homi Bhabha (1994) and Edward Said (1994).¹

In his most notable essay Bhabha (1994) states that cultural identity is closely linked to the notion of the Self which, in the case of the colonised nations, is created via the relation between the coloniser and the colonised. This relationship is grounded on the question of ambivalence, namely what the colonised-Self desires from the dominating Other, but should not, in fact desire. Upon realising its initial disavowal to the colonisers as well as their most desirable traits, the colonised-Self begins to imitate the colonisers, hence becoming a person that bears signs of appropriateness (when considering the colonisers' perspective), but shall always bear also a sign of inappropriateness marking the Self as the colonised. It is a distinct type of imitation located between mimicry and mockery in what Bhabha (1994) named the Third Space, which can be described as the psychological territory of the hybrid types, that is beings located between distinct cultures, possessing traits from within each of them. The notion of the hybrid corresponds to Said's vision of the migrant, who is by no means a fixed creation, but rather a fluctuating collection of echoes of which one was, is and eventually will be, or, to put it simply, a collection of labels *like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American [which] are not more than starting-points, [but are] followed into actual experience for only a moment [and then] are quickly left behind* (1994:336). It is tempting to say that both Bhabha (1994) and Said (1994) conform that the identity of every migrant or even being is composed of several Selves rooted in a presumably infinite number of cultures.

Modern psychologists, for instance Galen, have based their theories on similar principles. In his essay *The Self: The Incredulous Stare Articulated* Peter van Inwagen (2005) depicts Galen's theory of the Self by comparing the Self to a chain of pearls in which each piece of jewellery, referred to as a *sesment*,² is an integral part of the overall mentality created within a particular individual throughout his/her life. In other words, the Self, being a temporal chain of *sesments*, contains within itself other, more or less developed *sesments*, including the current Self, one which is donned at a given moment in time. Obviously, the Self, from the overall perspective becomes a complex notion which incorporates a wide range of 'I' that form a person's identity.

Presumably, the internal mixing of various characteristics occurring within the Self implies that, due to the various differences of the acquired cultural traits, current people are unique members of the world community. Nonetheless, all people

¹ The mentioned theories have been published in the mid-1940s, however the 1994s publications were available for use.

² Galen defines a *sesment* as *a physical object. It's a peculiarly shaped one in that it occupies a peculiarly shaped region of space-time. But it's no argument against the reality of this object that we can't say what its mass is, or could only by making some extremely artificial stipulation. SESMENTS are [...] like performances of musical works* (quoted in van Inwagen 2005:115).

possess the status of the citizen of the world, a being of a universal nature. At this point a certain contradiction is visible, namely whether the people of diversified cultural segments may attain a particular sameness or if it is the difference found within the multilayered beings that proves to be the core of their similarity. In other words, people are faced with the question: *Are we different or similar?* The purpose of the following article is to attempt to answer the above-stated inquiry on the basis of an analysis of the creation of an immigrant's cultural identity, which, in this particular case, is based on the liaison between Nazneen and Karim, the characters created by Monica Ali in her novel *Brick Lane*. In order to examine this complex process, the author of this article shall concentrate on identifying the object of desire of both literary heroes as well as the means of attaining the desired trait by reading the text through Rene Girard's (2001) theory of the triangle of desire and Levinas' (1991) hypothesis of the face-to-face encounter.

Bentley (2010:22) and Marx (2012:213) regard Ali's book as a type of 21st-century *Bildungsroman* that centres on the character of Nazneen, a young, submissive Bangladeshi woman who immigrates to England to marry a much older man on the request of her father. Due to the offer, which she cannot refuse, the nineteen-year-old girl begins a new life in the unfamiliar city of London, particularly in the Bangladeshi neighbourhood of Brick Lane. Initially, Nazneen is presented as a traditional and obedient wife, estranged in a small and cramped flat situated within a socially unfamiliar area. The immigrant takes shelter from the unknown in the imaginary safety of the household where, like most isolated Asian women abroad, she immerses herself in the daily activities of cooking, cleaning as well as reminiscing about her lost homeland.

There are many interpretations about where the turning point in Nazneen's life is located. In Bentley's (2010:89) opinion, it is the heroine's moment of fascination with the figure of an ice-skater that becomes the epiphany of freedom; Stonehewer Southmayd (2015:96) focuses on the influence of the protagonist's friend Razia and the inability of her husband, Chanu, to financially support the family; Al Mamun (2014:512) believes that the liaison between Nazneen and a young second-generation immigrant, Karim, is the pivotal moment in the character's process of development. Regardless of the reasons, it is an indisputable fact that each of the events mentioned have a great impact on the main character's process of identity formation. However, as has been previously stated, the article shall centre on the mentioned affair between Nazneen and Karim, for intimacy in their relationship serves as a driving force, which, as Weeks has noticed:

is the most spontaneous natural thing about us. It is the basis for our most passionate feelings and commitments. Through it we experience ourselves as real people; it gives us our identities, our sense of self, as men and women, [...] 'normal' or 'abnormal', 'natural' or 'unnatural'. Sex has become [...] the truth of our being (2003:3).

In fact, the physical aspect of a relationship as well as the emotions it spurs reflect the actual desire of an individual, who, at this intimate moment, is able to release all its suppressed wants, therefore genuinely expressing the hidden object of their desire. On account of this fact, it is only reasonable to seek the motivations of a character's conduct (including also accommodation and identity formation) by closer examining the most significant male-female relationship within the novel.

Apparently both Nazneen and Karim attempt to come closer to the true object of their desire by imitating one another. Unarguably, this model of desire does not correspond with the traditional Freudian or Lacanian understanding of the term; therefore it is only proper to turn to a less conventional means of reading the chosen text by the use of Rene Girard's (2001) theory of the triangle of desire. Contrary to Freud's and Lacan's linear models, which entail the presence of a subject of desire and its object, Girard (2001) presupposes the existence of a third element, namely a model, which serves several purposes.

Firstly, its role is to be admired by the subject. It seems that admiration is an important factor in the triangle of desire, mostly because it points to the perfection of the model as an ideal representation of a personage that can acquire the object of desire and enables the subject to directly (consciously) or indirectly (subconsciously) search for the characteristic that apparently he/she is lacking. Thus, begins the phase of imitation. Imitation (or mimicry as Bhabha (1994) would call it) is achieved by *imagining that you are someone else [...] choosing a model and imitating the person that you want to be, by mimicking his or her outward appearance, gestures, intonation and dress* (Gaultier quoted in Girard 2001:10).³ Similarly, individuals can spontaneously imitate the desires of the selected model.

By taking this perspective into account, Girard (2001) highlights the changing nature of the model that, from a person worthy of one's attention, becomes a rival or even an obstacle between the subject and the object of its desire. Simultaneously, the emerging rivalry serves as a tool for assessing the value of the object of desire, mainly if it's worth desiring or not. If the model-rival declares the object to be desirable, then the subject will compete to attain it. The more the object is desired by the model (be it actual or imagined desire from the subject's point of view), the more the subject struggles to achieve its ultimate goal. However, it is important to remember that, unlike the model, the object of desire is not a tangible person or even items, but a spiritual value, for instance love, fame, power, etc. that without the model would not come to our immediate attention. Therefore, only through the existence of the model can the subject begin to desire the otherwise undesirable object.

A certain paradox can be seen in the delineated theory, mainly that the more the subject resembles the model the further it is from attaining its object. The reason

³ [...] "wyobrazić sobie siebie innymi niż są" [...] naśladową postać, która postanowiły być, we wszystkim, co tylko daje się naśladować: w powierzchowności, gestach, intonacji, ubiorze.

for this situation is fairly uncomplicated. While being concentrated on imitating or competing with one another both the subject and the model lose sight of their object and cease to seek it. As a result neither of them actually achieves their goal, which allows the desire to further continue in the initiated state. Nevertheless, there are instances when either the subject or the model realise the futility of their actions. This can be explained with the use of Levinas' (1991) hypothesis of the face-to-face encounter.

Levinas (1991) believes that when the Self and the Other meet face-to-face, a distinct type of assessment takes place. During the encounter the participants evaluate one another on the basis of external traits, mainly exposed by the most expressive of all body parts, the face. However, it is not solely the physiognomy that influences the evaluation of the Other, but a more important, yet impalpable occurrence within one's infinity. By the implementation of various means of communication "the face" of the Other "speaks to" the encountered Self, thus exciting a particular situation between the Self and the Other. During the face-to-face encounter the Self realises that the Other is not (my)self, that there exists a difference, a difference between the participants. This Alterity causes the Me and the Other to engage in a discourse in the course of which the Self may either choose to reject the Other or open up to the faced human in response to his/her vulnerability expressed by a plea to not eliminate it, but rather attempt to grasp it.

I shall now try to conjoin this hypothesis with Girard's (2001) theory. Let us suppose that the Self from Levinas' (1991) hypothesis would subsequently pose as Girard's (2001) subject of desire and the Other as its chosen model, then during the described face-to-face encounter, a certain realisation occurs, namely that in all due respects the Self-subject and the Other-model are different, but similar in their desire, which is the same – to be acknowledged. Such events result in the Self's questioning of the nature of the encounter as well as its own identity and role in the surrounding environment, thus enabling it to embrace change, to assimilate.

Let us now turn to the main topic of the analysis. As has been stated above there are three points in Nazneen's life, which can be regarded as important factors in the heroine's process of assimilation. When considering the fascination with the figure of the ice-skater Nazneen is not so much enthralled with the performer, but rather with the immense possibilities of conquering *everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her* (Ali 2003:36). In other words, the secluded Nazneen desires freedom, freedom to decide about herself, her future and her feelings, which she is culturally deprived of by the Bengali tradition of female subservience. From Girard's (2001) point of view, the protagonist, who is aware of her limitations, begins to desire in the Other what she finds lacking in herself, hence establishing a certain linkage with the English society.

I would like to highlight that, from the Bangladeshis' cultural standpoint; there is no socially accepted reason for a woman to oppose the prevailing customs.

Therefore, any attempts at acquiring a certain degree of liberty are hindered either by Nazneen's husband Chanu's refusal or by her powerlessness which is portrayed as part of her character. Instances of such occasions are noticeable when Chanu does not consent to his wife learning the English language as well as when the pregnant Nazneen rebels against her "imprisonment" within Brick Lane by leaving the neighbourhood and entering the city centre of London, where she is faced with a crowd of unfamiliar and indifferent people. Later, this rebellion results in the heroine experiencing a type of a temporary emotional breakdown. Consequently, Nazneen's desire for freedom is suppressed, only to be nearly completely forsaken with the birth of her son when *her status in the family as well as society is immediately uplifted* (Mortada 2010:54). New possibilities are provided for a female who achieves the societal goal of preserving the lineage by producing male heirs. The young mother gains importance both in the eyes of the Bangladeshi community and her husband. In this respect, the heroine discovers a different means of liberation within the diaspora, which she readily plunges into.

Nonetheless, the attained status does not sufficiently fulfil Nazneen's desire of gaining freedom. Upon meeting Mrs Azad (the *Englished*⁴ Bangladeshi wife of her husband's acquaintance Dr Azad), whose complete assimilation into the English society has proved to be an effective escape route from the social constraints of the Bangladeshi culture, the heroine realises the misery of her own submissiveness as well as the superficiality of the gained "freedom" that is instantly annulled with the unexpected death of her son. At this point a reversal in values is noticeable in the conduct of the protagonist. Nazneen's desire for social freedom is gradually re-awakened in a long-term process of justifying her unfulfilled wishes. The woman acquires the basics of the English language in order to communicate with her daughters, Shahana and Bibi. Moreover, her husband's inability to support the family financially proves to be an opportunity for the female migrant to begin a sewing job, concurrently gaining economic independence. It would be more accurate to say that the main character steadily emerges from the cultural cocoon of submission, hence wishing to live through a greater number of experiences.

Apparently the quest for self-fulfilment and personal improvement is accelerated by the fateful encounter of Nazneen and Karim, a young second-generation Bangladeshi entrepreneur to whom the heroine becomes physically attracted. At first Nazneen is drawn to the external build of the handsome young man whose appearance corresponds to the image of a strong and independent Westerner. Karim is portrayed as having broad shoulders and hair cut close to a beautifully shaped skull. The young man always wears tight jeans, shirts with sleeves rolled up to the elbow, white trainers and a thin golden necklace that emphasises his appeal to the

⁴ Nayar (2008) applies the notion of *Englished* or *Americanised* to refer to immigrants who exhibit certain typically Western (in this case English or American) cultural strains unknown in their native culture, hence imitating or even to some degree becoming a member of a different cultural segment.

opposite sex whenever he takes a confident, yet fairly relaxed, stance with his legs spread and arms folded or leans against the walls or various pieces of furniture. He is often seen fiddling with his mobile phone, which he wears at his side in a leather holster like cowboys, the embodiment of Western maleness, keep their revolvers. What is crucial in the presented description is that Karim's appearance is devoid of any redeeming traits of a Bangladeshi man. The male character does not dress or even behave in accordance to the traditional customs of the members of the depicted minority group. Additionally, the fact that Karim stammers when speaking in Bengali and freely communicates only in English proves to be an advantage in the heroine's eyes.

The enumerated traits found within a seemingly non-British person, hypnotise Nazneen and ignite a silently burning passion within her. So great is the heroine's physical attraction that she even dreams about the second-generation immigrant:

She looked in the mirror but she did not see herself, only the flare of the sequins, and then she closed her eyes and the ice smelled of limes and she moved without weight and there was someone [Karim] at her side, her hand in another, and they turned together, arms around waists, and through her half-closed lashes she saw him. The fine gold chain about his neck (Ali 2008:178).

Surprisingly, it is not the man's face which the woman looks at in the night vision, but rather the golden chain that glitters like the sequins on the top resembling a garment worn by an English actress starring in a popular commercial. It would be more accurate to say that from Nazneen's point of view, Karim is by no means a person, but rather a personification of true *Englishness*, or at least a product of the British culture that she has had the opportunity to approach. By taking this fact into consideration, it becomes evident that a different desire looms underneath the need for sexual experiences, a longing much more profound than passion or lust, namely a desire for Englishness, the elusive embodiment of social and cultural liberation that Nazneen is enchanted with. To put it briefly, the protagonist's physical attraction towards Karim grounds itself on the desire to become English-like and, therefore, free.

According to Girard's (2001) theory, Nazneen (the subject of desire) wishes to attain the common British features, which, in turn, would allow her to flee from the social prison that the immigrant woman was placed in by the Bangladeshi diasporic community, thus gaining freedom (the actual object of desire). The aim can be attained only by selecting an exclusive model, one that possesses the traits needed. Karim proves to be a more suitable choice for imitation, rather than the impalpable figure of the ice-skater, for the heroine can not only actually establish a specific connection with the man, but also observe her model and mimic the necessary characteristics. From the very beginning of their relationship Nazneen looks at Karim *from the corner of her eye and [sees] him as a silhouette (Ali 2008: 212)*

or a frame of greater content existing in a certain proximity that awaits to be filled in with her already developed sentiments in order to create a new sentiment, a fuller Self. As a result a specific triangle of desire is established. However, the desire for freedom parallels the physical attraction emerging between Nazneen and Karim.

Nearly every initial scene involving the characters is inscribed with a gradual increase in the intensity of their lust. Initially, the intimacy accompanying this emerging passion is limited to seemingly insignificant actions on the part of both characters. As regards Nazneen's conduct, the Bengali woman frequently forgets to cover her hair in the presence of Karim, an unrelated man; she permits him to sit closer to her on various pieces of furniture, from a chair to the arm of the sofa on which her husband rests his head while sleeping, and even to observe the heroine during her sewing work or while preparing tea and performing housework. The familiarity emerging between Nazneen and Karim grows stronger and stronger with each meeting to the point where the heroine, despite the societal impropriety of the act, invites the young man to pray in her presence:

There was nothing wrong with it. No reason why he should not pray here; it only delayed her a short while.

'Allahu Akbar.'

He stood to attention, with hands raised to shoulder level. [...]

She heard the blood pound in her heart and she trembled because he would surely hear it. She closed her eyes. At once Amma came to her, shedding her famous tears, wailing with her hand over her mouth. [...]

His voice did not falter. In prayer he does not falter, thought Nazneen. [...]

He bowed, hands on knees, straight back. She saw how well he moved. Twice more. It was he who moved, but she who felt dizzy (Ali 2003: 234–235).

The presented situation enables Nazneen to scrutinise Karim in more detail and later reminiscent on his poses or even the smell of his shirt. Simultaneously, the heroine can indulge herself in her own emerging feelings of passion, which, from the societal perspective (represented by the figure of the wailing mother) seem more than improper.

In spite of the fact that Nazneen is preoccupied with her sewing job, she takes the opportunity to observe the waiting Karim. The youth roams about the space of the small apartment, scanning the view from the window, picking up Chanu's books, going round the table or lying on the sofa – an action that the heroine sums up by saying that it was as if *he were taking possession of the room, marking each item as his own, [whereas] she was waiting to be claimed as well* (Ali 2008:238). These seemingly purposeless acts of exploration can be perceived as Karim's attempts to occupy the narrow space of the flat. The man claims the objects placed within a common (in his eyes) Bangladeshi household simply by touching them. It is as if he longs for bodily contact with the Asian cultural forms of expression

and marks the items for which he wants to attain the status of holder. The quotation serves as proof of the youth's inclinations to be a genuinely Bangladeshi person. Undoubtedly, this observation deserves a closer insight.

I would like to point out that Nazneen's desire takes the form of a blind enthrallment. Frequently, during the meetings with Karim, Nazneen is immersed in her private thoughts, while ignoring the man's statements. In consequence, the heroine fails to realise the same kind of growing desire that awakens in the immigrants' offspring.

Apparently, Karim is aware of the cultural division between him and the representatives of the Bangladeshi diaspora. In his article, Tongure (2013:562) has written that to the first-generation immigrants Bangladesh is home, just like England is to their children. In fact, the characters concur with this belief during their first lengthy conversation, when both draw a line between themselves by admitting that each regards a different country as their homeland: *'In our country,' she said, 'everyone would stop. Come and help you.'* He rocked back in his chair: *'This is my country.'* (Ali 2008:212). In the quoted fragment the two characters identify themselves as representatives of different nations that share no common features.

In spite of this, Karim also yearns for acceptance by his parents' community. While observing Nazneen dressed in a traditional sari, the young entrepreneur recalls his late mother, thus assuming that the heroine is an obedient, shy and pious Bangladeshi woman who preserves the customs of the native culture. The transposition of the mother's role onto the heroine initiates a parallel triangle of desire within the young man. In this case, Karim becomes the subject to desire, seeking acceptance by the members of Brick Lane by choosing Nazneen, the cultural countertype of his mother, as his model. The mutual contact between the depicted characters suggests the occurrence of an overlapping process of assimilation.

During the reoccurring occasions of intimacy, Nazneen and Karim can discuss their personal problems in relation to their families as well as the social situation of the Bengali community, thus sharing their worries with each other. It is a new situation for Nazneen whose husband does not consider it necessary to converse with his wife, who as a pure village girl should not engage in difficult dilemmas that she does not need to comprehend to perform her household duties. Upon one of these confabulations Nazneen mentions Muhammad being a warrior, unconsciously sparking the youth's interest. As a result Karim invites Nazneen to a meeting of an informal group that he wants to lead. The invitation is meant to present to the model of Karim's desire the positive attributes which he metaphorically shares with the founder of Islam as the initiator of a religious group. Furthermore, by allowing Nazneen to take part in the voting, Karim enables her to participate in *a momentous thing. By raising her hand, or not raising it, she could alter the course of events, of affairs in the world of which she knew nothing* (Ali 2008:197). The event equips the heroine with a conviction that she possesses a particular kind of possibility or right to decide about matters directly or even indirectly relating to her private life.

Nazneen begins to see herself as an entity not necessarily restricted solely to the household, but rather as a member of the Bangladeshi community, the society or the Muslim community.

In the aftermath of the meeting, a striving for knowledge is ingrained within the heroine. Karim eagerly satisfies it by providing the isolated immigrant with magazines as well as newspapers containing stories from different countries from the entire globe. Reading, thus, becomes *a sweet and melancholy secret*, [during which Nazneen is] *caressing the phrases with her eyes, feeling Karim floating there, just beyond the words* (Ali 2008:198). It is a double excitement of infidelity and social disobedience, a means of escaping from the tediousness and discontent of existence of a Bangladeshi wife.

At the same time, this dual enthrallment obscures Nazneen's perception of the man's thriving ardor. The entrepreneur from Brick Lane not only broadens the first-generation immigrant's perspectives, but also secures his own position as the model by which Nazneen is to achieve social freedom. Subsequently, Karim comes closer to the heroine, who becomes his model of a perfect Bangladeshi. Throughout the inceptive stage of their relationship, both characters nurture their desire and the parallel passion, until it culminates after another meeting of the Bengali Tigers, when Nazneen, feeling an overwhelming awe and pride with regards to Karim's ability to successfully settle all the pressing matters, feels a sudden urge to possess the youth in the bodily sense. The sexual act is not so much a manifestation of a mutual infatuation, but rather an attempt to seize the Englishness, or in Karim's case the *Bangladeshiness*,⁵ embodied by the partners:

In the bedroom everything changed. Things became more real and they became less real. Like a Sufi in a trance, a whirling dervish, she lost the thread of one existence and found another. [...] She had submitted to her father and married her husband; she had submitted to her husband. And now she gave herself up to a power greater than these two, and she felt herself helpless before it. When the thought crept into her mind that the power was inside her, that she was its creator, she dismissed it as conceited (Ali 2003: 299–300).

It would be more accurate to state that the characters capitalise on the materialised traits, for the coitus makes the wanted features fleetingly tangible, thus allowing the subject to temporarily fill in the lack, which forms the basis of desire, hence for a brief moment moulding a new distinct segment of oneself, of its English or Bangladeshi Self.

Nonetheless, neither Nazneen nor Karim realise that they sustain their loss by creating phantasies of one another. Nazneen nearly through the entire novel sees

⁵ A concept proposed by the author of the article to describe the typical customs, traits, habits and traditions of a native Bangladeshi person that are desired by non-Bangladeshis.

Karim as an independent and strong-willed man, who can stand his ground and is *so sure of where he was standing and why* (Ali 2003:206). Needlessly, the heroine views the second-generation immigrant as a personage who is aware of his wants and unwaveringly creates his own place in the British society. We read that in Nazneen's eyes *Karim was a man and he spoke as a man. Unlike Chanu he was not mired in words. He did not talk and talk until he was not certain of anything* (Ali 2003:261). In other words Nazneen believes that Karim knows exactly where he belongs and is free to make his own choices in relation to his life.

Likewise, the heroine herself is fathomed by Karim as *the real thing* (Ali 2003:385), namely a village girl from Bangladesh, who has successfully underwent the rough process of settling in an unfamiliar country without being shorn of her original cultural traits. Nazneen, hence, unconsciously becomes the epiphany of *Bangladeshiness*. It is tempting to say, that each of the characters appear to attract the other due to them possessing the most English- or Bangladeshi-like strains, which acquisition will allow them to attain freedom as well as acceptance on the part of both the British and Muslim communities. This illusion is constantly reasserted when Nazneen and Karim consummate their relationship through physical intimacy.

According to Girard's (2001) theory of the triangle of desire, the characters imitate one another by acquiring the most visible traits born by their respective models. In the course of events Nazneen begins to believe that modification can be effortlessly achieved by a change in style that would make her outward image English-like, thus making her more self-confident, even fearless and charismatic. She, thus, becomes preoccupied with her appearance, attempting to wear fine clothes, often leaving her head uncovered to present the beauty of her well-brushed hair, and shaving her legs to be more attractive to herself and her lover. Simultaneously, Nazneen gradually gains a certain consciousness of her role as a mother and wife and exhibits a degree of interest not only in the housework, but also in the relationship with her husband and daughters as well as her attitude to her everyday work:

She spent more time talking to her daughters, and they surprised her with their intelligence, their wit and their artless sensitivity. She served her husband and she found that he was a caring husband, a man of integrity, educated, and equipped with a pleasing thirst for knowledge. She did her work and she discovered that work in itself, performed with a desire for perfection, was not so tiresome if it was done with a song on the lips and in the heart (Ali 2003:301).

Furthermore, the heroine decides to repay her family's debts which it owes the local usurer, Mrs Islam. Never before did the woman think about such complex issues or felt compelled to take any form of measures. Despite this, the burden of responsibility as well as remorse caused by her infidelity proves to be too heavy.

Consequently, Nazneen goes through an emotional breakdown, which awakens within her *the first real stoicism she has shown to her fate* (Ali 2003:346) and enables the female protagonist to come to a personal resolution about her life when *she's listening [to her husband and Karim]. But she is not obeying* (Ali 2003:341). The emotional breakdown proves to be an important moment in Nazneen's existence, for she attains her own independence and begins to seek her individual place in the world as a liberated, working-woman, a mother and an original bearer of the Bengali traditions.

Correspondingly, the affair also influences the male hero in a similar manner. The liaison elevates the young man to a true master, the possessor of a woman who is the embodiment of genuine *Bangladeshi*ness. In pursuance of his aspirations, Karim becomes involved with the actions of the Bengali Tigers, thus beginning a period of extensive reading, either of magazines, leaflets or Islamic websites that allow him to comprehend the concerns of the worldwide *Ummah*.⁶ The unnatural devotion steadily transforms into a need for monopolising the group as its sole leader. The rationale behind this conduct is the young man's affiliation to the Bengali Tigers, which is a sign of his Bangladeshi Self. In Nazneen's eyes, the God-conscious Karim has been losing his English attributes. With single glimpses, the heroine notices that her lover in some respects is steadily trans-substantiating into a typical Bangladeshi patriarch, who even after the most intimate situations treats his wife like a loyal servant. Moreover, the man's attractive appearance alters as well. As a leader of an assembly with a religious background, Karim begins to mimic the Muslims by changing his appearance and wearing a *Panjabi-pyjama, fleece, big boots and skullcap [that made him look] like he could be on his way to a mosque; or to a fight* (Ali 2008:308); he grows his hair and a beard to the point that it covers the mole on his chin, which used to be an emblem of physical attraction for Nazneen as well as the symbol of his contained Englishness, that fades away. Likewise, the importance felt by the heroine whenever she voiced her opinions in the presence of Karim disappears, replaced by a profound indifference and negligence expressed by the man, which infuriates Nazneen, due to her insatiable craving for seeing her beloved *pull the audience to his side, running home and waiting for him, knowing yet scarcely believing he would come. That was how she wanted him, like that, not with his feet on her coffee table and holes in his socks* (Ali 2008:286).

Neither of the characters is cognizant of the Other's inner-transformation as the relationship is marked by silence. Silence, in the sense of a lack of verbal communication, deprives the portrayed migrants of the possibility to understand one another. The explanation is that during these moments of tranquillity, uninterrupted by any form of expression or the male monologues to the distracted woman, silence

⁶ Ummah (in Arabic: 'community') a term used to refer to a nation with a common ancestry, geography or history, or the whole of the Islamic world.

is regarded by the heroes as a type of spiritual harmony. The narrator employs silence in order to meditate on the man standing before her. It is a time when she can freely study the youth's general manner of being as well as succumb to her own 'sexual' fantasies. Therefore, it is not surprising that Nazneen does not instantly notice the decline in Karim's Englishness, which is replaced by a more conventional Asian conduct. In the same manner, the man, accustomed to Nazneen's reticence, which is considered to be a proof of unwavering female approval, overlooks the discernible changes within the heroine, hence regarding his mistress as a perfect Bangladeshi woman figure. Thus, silence is a social blindfold: it prevents the characters from genuinely seeing the other, instead consolidating the previously mentioned fantasies, concomitantly superficially sustaining the similarity to the original mental images of an English person or a native of Bangladesh.

The tensions caused by the opposite expectations of the two characters lead to frictions between the lovers. The agitation reaches a climax when Nazneen finally confronts Karim in a face-to-face encounter. During their last conversation in a restaurant, the characters freely verbalise the sensibilities towards one another. Nazneen realises that there exists a difference between them, a difference in personal objectives expressed in the heroine's struggle to become English and the young man's yearning to be Bangladeshi:

She touched his hand for the last time. 'Oh Karim, that we have already done. But always there was a problem between us. How can I explain? I wasn't me, and you weren't you. From the very beginning to the very end, we didn't see things. What we did – we made each other up' (Ali 2008:382).

In brief, both characters assume the role of the Other, of *someone else*, the *living presence* that remains visibly exposed to the Self in reality. To Karim, Nazneen represents the Bangladeshi culture, whereas to the female protagonist the man embodies the English culture. The aforementioned alterity forces the lovers to engage in a discourse and either reject the newly established Self of their beloved or accept it as equal. In other words, Nazneen and Karim lose their status as subjects of desire and models, only to become the Selves that face their respective Others in a face-to-face encounter. Levinas' (1991:275) refers to this moment as a plea of the vulnerable person who does not want to be eliminated, but acknowledged. This situation takes place when Nazneen mentions the source of the characters' mutual ignorance, mainly the readiness to protect the idealised vision of an Englishman and Bengali woman created in the lovers' minds, thus admitting that they are, in fact, different from the images created by both of them and also different from one another. It seems that the process of mimicking the cultural traits of the chosen models has resulted in the subject-Selves becoming too similar to their fantasies of each other. Through the simultaneously occurring processes of accommodation Nazneen and Karim have lost their connection. Nevertheless, the quoted fragment clearly indicates that at least

one of the participants of the encounter recognises the sameness within them, the sameness in their attempts to attain their object of desire, desire to become free from the culturally constructed shells, the Bengali in case of Nazneen and the English in the case of Karim, and find a place for oneself in the world.

In conclusion, the conducted analysis emphasises the significance of the surroundings in the process of identity formation as well as accommodation. The existence of the model is crucial as a means of observation and imitation on the part of the assimilating immigrants, who tend to be different in their objects of desire, however, similar in their attempts to attain freedom or acceptance. At the same time, it also proves that the overwhelming diversity is connected by a collective desire for sameness, of becoming the same as our chosen models. Therefore, it may be said that all immigrants yearn to achieve a single aim of becoming part of a larger, host society. For this reason, the metaphorical journey of creating one's identity takes various directions, depending on the individual's cultural and social backgrounds, but mostly towards the objects that one desires to claim. That is to say, we are different in our desires, yet surprisingly, we are the same with regard to the source of human motivation to blend in.

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