

Study Material

Module No: 9

Faculty Name: Satabdi Roy

Semester: Semester VI (Hons)

Topic: Brick Lane

Summary

The novel centers around the life of [Nazneen](#), a Bangladeshi immigrant who marries an older man named [Chanu Ahmed](#) in an arranged marriage. She relocates to London to start her new married life with her husband. In London, Nazneen is exposed to a new culture, and struggles to find balance between new possibilities and old traditions. Nazneen also maintains contact with her outcast sister, [Hasina](#), who ran away with a man in a love marriage. In her letters, Hasina describes her difficult life working in a factory, and then later as a prostitute.

As time passes, Nazneen becomes increasingly frustrated with Chanu and his lack of decisiveness. The couple has a son, but he dies as an infant. This loss draws the couple closer together, and Nazneen gives birth to two daughters, [Shahana](#) and Bibi. As his daughters grow older, Chanu becomes more and more worried about what their fate will be in a foreign country and becomes more determined than ever to return to Bangladesh. In order to get the money for this move, he takes work as a cab driver, allows Nazneen to work sewing clothes, and borrows money from wealthy [Mrs. Islam](#).

Once Nazneen begins working, she meets [Karim](#), who brings her sewing supplies from his uncle's store. They end up having an affair, and Karim also opens Nazneen's eyes to growing injustice and racial tensions. However, Nazneen is haunted by guilt and ends up having a mental breakdown. After she recovers, Nazneen ends the relationship with Karim. With pressure mounting to pay back their debt, Nazneen becomes increasingly convinced that she cannot go back to Bangladesh. She plans to tell Chanu on the day that they are scheduled to leave. On the day the family is supposed to leave for Bangladesh, racially motivated riots break out in their neighborhood. Nazneen is horrified when she learns that her daughter Shahana has run away and might be caught up in the violence. With Karim's help, she is able to find Shahana, and that night Nazneen tells Chanu that she and the children will be remaining in London.

In the months after Chanu's departure, Nazneen finds a newfound sense of independence and freedom as she works to provide for herself and her children. Meanwhile, Hasina finds a fresh start and the possibility of love with another man

in Bangladesh. The novel ends with Nazneen going ice skating for the first time, symbolizing her dream of finally leading an independent life.

Character List

Chanu Ahmed

He is the husband of Nazneen and is about forty years old at the start of the novel. He is an educated man and works in a state institution, but later quits to become a taxi driver. He plans to return back to Bangladesh with his family.

Karim

Karim is the lover of Nazneen and is a second-generation Bengali immigrant in London.

Nazneen

Nazneen is the protagonist in the book. She lives in a village in Bangladesh until she is eighteen and then moves to London when she gets married to Chanu. Nazneen is the sister of Hanisa, and the mother of Raqib (who dies as an infant), Shahana, and Bibi.

Hasina

Hasina is the younger sister of Nazneen. She rebels against her family by marrying for love, and lives a difficult but independent life. Hasina writes to Nazneen, telling her sister about her life.

Shahana

She is the daughter of Nazneen and Chanu. She is born in Brick Lane, London. Shahana has never been to Bangladesh, and she does not like the Bengali culture.

Dr. Azad

Dr. Azad is a prominent member of the London Bangladeshi community. Because he is influential and well-educated, Chanu is always trying to build a closer relationship with him.

Rupban (Amma)

The mother of Nazneen and Hasina, Rupban seems to live an unhappy life and dies when her daughters are young.

Hamid (Abba)

He is the father of Nazneen and Hasina.

Mumtaz

The sister of Hamid and aunt to Hasina and Nazneen, she plays an influential role in the lives of her nieces, especially after their mother dies.

Razia

She is a woman Nazneen becomes friends with after moving to London. Razia has two children and she inspires Nazneen to become more independent and stand up for herself.

Mrs. Islam

A wealthy and well-connected older woman, Mrs. Islam loans money to Chanu and is determined to be paid back.

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Themes

Racism

When Chanu and [Nazneen](#) move to London, they take up residence in [Brick Lane](#), a multiethnic neighborhood. Nazneen meets a lot of other Bangladeshi immigrants like herself and becomes invested in the community there. Chanu, however, is exposed to the racism of the rest of the city. As an immigrant, he is often treated badly and not given the same opportunities he would have been offered as a white person. In response to the way he is treated, Chanu becomes more and more mistrustful of British society, and comes to see it as a corrupting influence.

Gender

As a Bangladeshi girl, Nazneen experiences an arranged marriage to her husband, Chanu. Chanu is a kind husband, but he subscribes to gender norms, assuming that Nazneen's priorities will be taking care of the home and children. Nazneen has no control over her important life decisions as she is the subject of her husband's will. Later on, Chanu becomes determined to move back to Bangladesh, so he allows her to work in order to help them move faster. Other female characters, such as [Razia](#) and [Hasina](#), find themselves even more at the mercy of gendered power dynamics. However, by the end of the novel, Nazneen has shown herself to be able to contribute economically and make decisions about her own life. Noemie Pereira-Ares notes that "the main female personae are constantly struggling against patriarchal constraints, eventually succeeding in becoming independent subjects and active agents in their migrating experience" (204).

Motherhood

Motherhood is shown to be a source of both fulfillment and sorrow in the novel. Nazneen and Hasina's mother loves her daughters dearly, but also seems to be unhappy in her marriage. When Nazneen becomes a mother, she becomes more frustrated with her husband because she wants to give her son a better life. Nazneen's love for her son, and later her daughters, helps her to feel stronger and more self-assured.

However, it also causes her profound grief because she cannot protect her son from illness and she worries about protecting her daughters who grow up torn between two cultures. For other women, such as Razia, motherhood pushes them to become more self-reliant. However, motherhood often traps women in lives and marriages they do not necessarily want because they fear hurting their children or losing them entirely.

Family

Family is at the core of Nazneen's life and purpose. She is often unhappy because she is torn between her family of origin, and the family she creates after her marriage. Nazneen always misses her sister and continues to feel responsible for Hasina. Letters from Hasina are one of the only things that connects Nazneen to the family she grew up in. At the same time, Nazneen loves her children fiercely and gradually comes to even love Chanu because of the experiences the couple goes through together. Nazneen feels intense guilt during her affair because of how it betrays and jeopardizes her family. Family makes Nazneen who she is, but it also often makes her feel sad, guilty, and trapped.

Fate

Fate is introduced as a major theme when Nazneen's life is left to chance when she is a newborn. She grows up thinking that she should just accept whatever happens to her, and not try to assert her will. However, life forces Nazneen to have more agency. Her desire to help her family leads her to take risks like starting to work. Once she meets [Karim](#), Nazneen also begins to experience desire, and chooses to act to follow that desire. By the end of the novel, when she chooses to remain in

England with her daughters because she knows she can support them, Nazneen has learned that she can make choices and decide at least some of her own fate.

Desire

For much of the novel, Nazneen seems docile and obedient. She marries Chanu without complaint and works hard to be a dutiful wife. When Chanu denies her things she wants, such as the opportunity to go to school or to get to know the city better, she seems to accept his authority. However, simmering under the surface, Nazneen is filled with desire to make her own choices and experience more of life. She is filled with shame, but she also cannot deny that she imagines different opportunities for herself. Her affair with Karim represents all of her long repressed desires finally breaking free.

History

Chanu takes pride in being an educated man, and he also loves the history of his country and his people. He is discouraged to find that Bengali history does not seem to be recognized or valued in England. Chanu immerses himself in English literature and history along with learning about his native country, and therefore believes that people can know about more than one culture. As his daughters get older, Chanu fears what it will mean for them if they grow up without a sense of history or connection to the culture they came from. Chanu believes it will impact their self-esteem and how they see themselves. His desire to return to Bangladesh is rooted in his desire to give his children a sense of roots and history.

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Symbols, Allegory and Motifs

Ice Skating (Motif)

Very early in the novel, Nazneen is intrigued when she sees ice skating on television. Throughout the years she lives in London, Nazneen comes back to motifs of ice skating, whether by watching it on television or trying on clothes and imaging herself as a skater. At key moments in her life, she also explores moving her body and imaging what it would be like to skate. Finally, at the very end of the novel, Razia takes Nazneen skating for the first time. Skating symbolizes Nazneen's desire for freedom and independence, and her hope of living a life where she can make her own choices. At first it seems impossible, but she gradually moves closer towards this goal. Importantly, when Nazneen finally goes skating, she does so while still wearing her sari. She is able to combine her identity and history with a new vision of being free.

Chanu's Trousers (Symbol)

When Nazneen briefly goes home to wash and change her clothes while Raqib is in the hospital, she feels empowered and triumphant. It seems like Raqib has fully recovered from his illness, and Nazneen feels proud that she has asserted herself and fought to save her son. Impulsively, she tries on a pair of

Chanu's trousers. The trousers symbolize power, assertiveness, and the ability to make one's own fate. For Nazneen, it seems like these qualities had been limited only to men, but in this moment, she feels like she can also share in them.

Nazneen's Best Sari (Symbol)

On the day that Nazneen and Karim make love for the first time, she puts on her best sari. She does not know at the time that they will consummate their relationship, and cannot understand why she feels the impulse to dress up for no reason. The sari symbolizes the emergence of Nazneen's desire and femininity. Even though she tries to deny it, her attraction to Karim has awakened a new consciousness about her appearance. She feels aware of her body and sensuality in a way she has never experienced before. The sari symbolizes Nazneen's desire to no longer be invisible and passive, but to draw attention to herself and finally experience pleasure.

The Smell of Limes (Motif)

Whenever Karim is around, Nazneen detects a smell of limes. She associates this smell with him, and her desire for him. The scent of the limes becomes a motif whenever Nazneen is thinking about her lover. The motif evokes the sensual, bodily response she has to him, and it also reveals that she notices the smallest details about him. This motif also shows how Nazneen's attraction to Karim is associated with a time in her life when she was more youthful and carefree. Nazneen often reflects on how her early life in Bangladesh was much more sensual and vibrant: she can vividly recall smells, tastes, and colors. The association of Karim with the smell of a tropical

fruit shows that he transforms Nazneen into the young, open-hearted girl again.

Plastic Bags (Symbol)

When Hasina writes about her life with James and Lovely, she mentions that James works for a plastics company, and also describes how the street in front of their mansion is littered with plastic bags. The business is threatened by a potential ban on plastic bags. The plastic bags symbolize wealth, greed, and corruption in Bangladesh. James is making a profit off of something that has destructive and ugly effects on society. His business allows him to live a wealthy life, but doesn't benefit society. Although Hasina doesn't give many details, her letters hint that James is eventually going to suffer the consequences of living a corrupt and greedy life.