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Brick Lane: Women's Stimulating Journey to Self-Consciousness

“Most women’s lives remain centered on their traditional roles, and they had limited access to markets, productive services, education, health care, and local government” (Heitzman and Worden, 1989). Here, Heitzman and Worden seek to voice for women who have been suffering from the limitations of the traditional values installed in the society; moreover, it is these “traditional roles” that triggered women to be submissive of men and to remain inferior to men. It is a fact that such gender inequality still exists in many countries; however, women in the Third World can be seen as one of the severest victims. This is why Janet Momsen points out, “For all societies, the common denominator of gender is female subordination. For women of the contemporary Third World, the effects of patriarchal attitudes are exacerbated by economic crisis and legacy of imperialism” (Momsen, 1996). Therefore, this essay explores to justifiably bring up such matter of Third World-female oppression and submissiveness through analyzing Monica Ali’s novel, *Brick Lane*. Moreover, the feminist’s perspective is used in this essay to show Nazneen’s journey of starting from submissiveness to independence, of which this transcendence of self-consciousness is actually stimulated by the close ones in her surroundings. After reading this essay, one will gradually agree with Ali’s wishes to arouse all the female readers’ awareness of

the need to go on the life journey of independence, instead of being a woman who is eternally manipulated by men and fate.

To begin with, we will start from discussing about Nazneen's mother's influence on Nazneen's life philosophy. Just from the first chapter of *Brick Lane*, readers immediately get the message that Nazneen's mother teaches Nazneen the importance of following fate and leave all the issues to God:

As Nazneen grew she heard many times this story of How You Were Left To Your Fate. It was because of her mother's wise decision that Nazneen lived to become the wide-faced, watchful girl that she was. Fighting against one's Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, or perhaps most times, it can be fatal. Not once did Nazneen question the logic of the story of How You Were Left To Your Fate. (*Brick Lane* Ch.1)

From these sentences, we can see that this is the "traditional" Nazneen, the ignorant Nazneen that had not been stimulated or enlightened. That is to say, being a traditional Bangladeshi and naturally following her mother's conventional philosophy of "not going against fate", Nazneen does not even know that she has a reason to question this philosophy of life. Furthermore, she merely accepts the fact that it is her fate to survive in this world, for her mother did nothing to save her during birth, but she still lives. This is why during her early years in London, her mother words of telling her "Just wait and see, that's all we can do" acts like a pain-killer to soothe her insecure soul. However, a turning point occurs when Nazneen found out the truth of the cause

of her mother's death, which is due to Nazneen's father's having an affair with another woman and conducted domestic violence to his own wife. Thus, Nazneen's mother chose to commit suicide instead of bearing her painful life. This truth shocked Nazneen so much, for it is her mother that told her to "bear everything in life". However, her mother's suicidal act greatly contradicts to this conviction, for she does not bear the pain of being beaten by her husband anymore. This indeed triggers Nazneen to begin to question whether is it right to bear life; in the end, Nazneen eventually realizes that her mother's choice is a way to fight against fate. That is to say, her mother's death is not decided by fate but by herself. Therefore, the death of Nazneen's mother can be seen as one of the starting points of Nazneen's awakening of independence. Next, when it comes to Hasina, Nazneen's sister, she also plays an important role to trigger Nazneen to thinking of changing her original principles of life. Ali depicts Hasina's personality completely the opposite of Nazneen's, and instead of obeying her father's orders to be settled with an arranged marriage, Hasina chose to audaciously eloped with the man she loves. When Nazneen receives Hasina's letters of informing her happiness, Nazneen starts to imagine what the taste of true love would be like: "Whenever she got a letter from Hasina, for the next couple of days she imagined herself an independent woman, too" (*Brick Lane* Ch.4). This shows some signs of Nazneen's curiosity of being independent, though she still has

not possessed the bravery to try it. Although life seems so tough to Hasina, she always depends on herself by running away from her home, her father and her husband; readers can find out that somehow, Nazneen admires Hasina's guts and independence, and later, Nazneen even thinks of running away, which goes against her fate for the first time, for she seeks to have a different life but is still stuck in the middle of hesitation: "Sometimes she wanted to get up and run. Most of the time she did not want to run, but neither did she want to sit still. How difficult it was, this business of sitting still. But there was nothing really to complain of" (*Brick Lane* Ch.4). From this contemplation, we can see that though Nazneen has not yet taken action, her sister has start to instill some new thoughts to her mind, and Nazneen's mind no longer remains calm and impassive like the "traditional Nazneen". Moving on the next stimulant of Nazneen's transcendence to self-consciousness is her elder daughter, Shahana. Shahana can be regarded as a similar model of Hasina, for the two are both brave and daring. For instance, Shahana dares to shout against her father by saying, "I didn't ask to be born here" (*Brick Lane* Ch.8). Moreover, Shahana even wishes to have a tattoo and a lip ring, for she boldly claims, "It is my body" (*Brick Lane* Ch.14). When it comes to being straightforward and explicit, Shahana is the kind of girl that asks and speaks whatever she thinks. For instance, she detests her father so much that once, she asked Nazneen whether she loves Chanu or not, and Nazeen just answers that Chanu

is a good man and she is lucky in her marriage. Here, we all know that the love between herself and Chanu is not the love which Shahana refers to. In addition, Shahana strongly opposes the idea of returning to Bangladesh and tells her parents continuously that she insists on staying in London. Although Nazneen does not want to go back, either, she still chooses to remain silent instead of fighting against the idea. Every time when Shahana asks Nazneen whether she wants to go back to Bangladesh or not, Nazneen will be entangled between the choices of staying in London and going back to Bangladesh. To this point, we can say that Nazneen becomes indecisive and contradictory, for she feels the urge to make it right for her daughters. Therefore, Shahana's rebellious nature against her father and independence has influenced Nazneen in some sense. The last female character who also affects Nazneen's values greatly is her friend, Razia. First, Nazneen learns to seek for financial independence from Razia, for it is Razia that introduces the job of being a seamstress to Nazneen. Furthermore, Razia is a woman that relies on herself, too, and though her life is tough, she remains strong enough to stand it. For instance, Razia's husband died at work, and her son steals money from her in order to take drugs. However, Razia is not beaten by these misfortunes happening in her life; instead, she emphasizes that every woman should have a job, so as to avoid being dependent of the men around her. Therefore, far from being crashed, Razia has become even tougher after encountering the

misfortunes of her life, and her hard life triggers her to become a Western woman who has a job and brings up all of her children by herself. In addition to introducing a job for Nazneen, Razia even encourages Nazneen to go to college and learn English. Such encouragement leads to Nazneen's eagerness of wanting to read and learn instead of remaining illiterate. Therefore, one cannot deny that Razia affects Nazneen strongly, for she encourages her to seek for the chance to earn money and the right to receive education.

Second, the two male characters are strong stimulants to Nazneen's transformation from a naivety to independence. We will first discuss the influence of her husband, Chanu. Nazneen's marrying to Chanu is an arranged marriage settled by her father, and she did not even meet Chanu before they get married. At the very beginning, Nazneen remains obedient to her father's wishes, and she trusts that her father will not choose a bad man to be her husband; Nazneen believes that it is her fate to marry Chanu and does not have the thought of resistance, for she says to her father, "Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma" (*Brick Lane* Ch. 1). However, during a friend's visit, Nazneen discovered that Chanu does not respect her or loved her as a "wife", but rather a "good worker". That is to say, Chanu marries Nazneen just because that "a blind uncle is better than no uncle" (*Brick Lane* Ch.1). This notion shows that Chanu thinks that

any wife is better than no wife. This discovery triggers Nazneen to realize that her marriage is nothing but dull, for she then has gradually found out that she has been a victim who suffers from a patriarchal system. For instance, the strong domination of her husband and the lack of attention her husband pays on her talk or suggestions, all arouses Nazneen's fury of being ignored and disrespected. In the end, the futility of Chanu actually enables Nazneen to have a chance to receive the job as a seamstress offered by Razia. Next, the second and equally crucial male character who influences Nazneen a great deal is her lover, Karim. In fact, most readers will regard Karim as the strongest stimulant of Nazneen's transformation to independence and self-consciousness. To begin with, Karim's more open-minded, and flexible manner attracts Nazneen, and it is how he treats her that makes her feel so much loved. For instance, he likes to talk to Nazneen, share interesting thoughts with Nazneen, and offer Nazneen something to read. When Nazneen is sewing, Karim will ask her to stop her work and just talk to him. Such different ways of treating her makes Nazneen feel so much respected and loved; moreover, it is an absolute contrast with Chanu's way of treating and communicating with her. In addition, Karim also invites Nazneen to the meeting for all Muslims, and even lets Nazneen cast a vote. Here, we can see that Ali is actually trying to voice for women who do not have the chance to participate in political elections, which shows the mishap of a male dominated society.

Therefore, when Nazneen found out that she has the right to vote, she sees herself as the main influence of Karim's victory. "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" (*Brick Lane* Ch11). This example is an exaggeration of how ecstatic and joyful a woman would feel the time when she is offered a chance to vote for her own will and even have an influence on the society. Gradually, after Karim's showing her so many new experiences and giving her feelings she has never felt before, Nazneen begins to realize that if she seeks to change her life, then she needs to first have the courage to step out for her happiness. Therefore, we will all agree that Nazneen's lover, Karim, promotes her final independence.

Last, after having a clear insight of the characters that influence Nazneen and leads her to her final transformation, we can examine the "awaken Nazneen". She neither chooses to go back to Bangladesh with Chanu nor to marry Karim. Instead, Nazneen becomes so independent and strong-willed that she has decided to stay in London and take care of her daughters. Nazneen and her daughters' teaming up together demonstrated the female cooperation against male's dominance and manipulation. In the end of the novel, Nazneen can play freely in the snow with her daughters, which symbolizes the female independence in society.

To conclude, this essay analyzes the main factors that contribute to Nazneen's

independence. Her family members, her friend, and her lover and her friend all play an important role in Nazneen's journey to self-consciousness and independence. Here, Ali's work reveals that many women are going through this process, to struggle against the misfortunes of life, especially when it comes to gender inequality. In the end, women should try to step out and voice for their rights, so as to accomplish the transformation of gaining control and independence in their own lives, just like Nazeen, an immigrant in Britain facing a tough life, a submissive woman who becomes brave and strong.

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