

# Understanding Cultural Miscommunication in a Host Country: A Comparative Study of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

**Bhargavi Duarah**

*bhargaviduarah403@gmail.com*

## ***Abstract***

*Monica Ali's Brick Lane (2003) and Zadie Smith's White Teeth (2000) are both written by woman writers who are immigrants in a foreign country. Both authors have written about the position of an immigrant in a host country. But there is a stark contrast in the portrayal of immigrants by the two authors. While one is placed under the negative impact of migration on a first generation immigrant, the other is comparatively portrayed in the positive canon of the migration impact. In this article, I have attempted to draw similarities between both the authors' perspective of an immigrant in a host country as well as their differences in opinion. Yet I shall argue that the positioning of an immigrant in a host country goes over and beyond than just the third space. I shall also attempt to analyze the change in behavior of an immigrant in a host country and the psychological changes that take place as a result. In such a scenario, loss of identity and difference in the self are unavoidable.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Brick Lane; White Teeth; host country; immigrant; third space*

## **Introduction:**

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Zadie Smith's debut novel *White teeth* (2000) have put forward stories of immigrants in a host country. Ali's *Brick Lane* focuses on the life of a first generation protagonist in a foreign country while Smith's novel revolves around the lives of three families, namely, the Chalfens, Bowdens and Iqbals. Both the novels focus on the lives of their central characters in the multicultural setting of London, England. The authors highlight an immigrant's life outside of their homeland situated in a distant foreign country and the consequences this shift in location has on their identity and the self.

Multiculturalism in England has opened a wide range of theories in the pages of the literary canon. With the rising number of immigrants in England, the conflicts coming from cultural differences is unavoidable. The high number of non-natives in the country has sparked a new range of writers coming from various backgrounds who are writing on these issues arising from multiculturalism. It has been continuously discussed in various fields of literature as a new form of social anthropology (Arikan, 2008).

The most common factor for this multiculturalism in England and other countries with higher levels of per capita income is migration at a large scale. According to recent reports, the number of forcibly displaced people continues to rapidly rise worldwide, reaching a record 110 million at the end of 2022 (MDM, 2023). As these numbers continue to rise rapidly, we see the misconceptions and prejudices around migrants and refugees growing as well. This may lead to negative attitude of the natives towards anyone from a different cultural background thus initiating violence among communities.

Ali's *Brick Lane* revolves around the major characters of two sisters, Nazneen and Hasina. She centralizes both the female protagonists in two different demographic regions and emphasizes the social and cultural difficulties adhering to both the characters. Smith's *White Teeth* on the other hand is not based on the life and struggles of a singular character. The story rather focuses on the trials and tribulations of three major families namely, the Chalfens, Bowdens and Iqbals. Smith has fabricated the stories of immigrant families from a lighter perspective as compared to Ali's deep subjugated structure of the female characters. However, in this article I have tried to analyze and further draw similarities between both the writer's perspectives of immigration and the stereotypical patterns and practices surrounding an immigrant in a host country. I have also attempted to justify that the psychological changes following a shift in location is unavoidable and can lead to certain impacts on an immigrant's character as well as their life. This article attempts at reaching new perspectives of re-reading migration and a migrant's miscommunication in a host country. The article is divided into four sections to substantiate the above contentions. The first section focuses on the causes of migration to a foreign country and the physiological and psychological consequences related to it. The second section emphasizes cultural miscommunication and stereotypes surrounding migrants and refugees in the host country. The third section examines the cultural dominance in the novels *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali and *White Teeth* (2000) by Zadie Smith respectively. The fourth and last section of this article draws the similarities in the writing style of Ali and Smith as well as their altering perspectives of immigrants in a host country. Both the novels help understand multiple cultural settings around the world and how multiculturalism leads to differences in opinion about the non-native section of the society in England.

## Causes of Migration to a Foreign Country

Migration means the movement of a person or people from one country or locality to another for hopes of a better future. People have been migrating from the beginning of time in search of better opportunities. Be it food or shelter or a better lifestyle, migration has been an important aspect of human beings from a very long period of time. According to the dictionary of the Turkish Language Association, migration can be defined as: "The act of moving individuals or communities from one country to another, from one settlement to another settlement, relocation, and emigration for economic, social and political reasons" (TDK, 2022). A different perspective of migration is "the movement of a person or group of across an international border or within a state. It is the population movements in which people move regardless of their duration, structure and reason.

This includes the migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, people moving for different purposes such as family reunification” (IOM, 2013). There can be various types of migration within and outside the borders as well. To have a better understanding of migration and its patterns we can always take a look in the history of migration. The roots of migration takes us back to the time when people first started moving from one place to the other in search of better living habitats. Factors circulating migration in the contemporary world include economic, social, political, demographic as well as natural reasons.

### **Economic Factor**

One of the major causes of migration is poverty. Lack of adequate income to sustain daily needs may lead to explicit behavior in some individuals who take illegal shelter in neighboring countries and resort to unethical means of living. It should be noted that issues such as lack of access to food, inaccessibility to health services, inaccessibility to clean water, insufficient wages, lack of job security, and unfair distribution of income trigger international migration movements (Telsaç, 2022).

### **Social Factor**

Unlike the economic factor, there can be various reasons under the social factor of migration. Strong familial ties, a common sense of belonging and empathy towards the same religious community may be some of the social factors of migration. We should note down here that the social factor is mainly overpowered by the sense of belonging to a particular region and this belongingness leads to the formation of a diaspora within the like-minded communities in a foreign country.

### **Political Factor**

Political reasons are generally the most common form of migration theory. Lack of freedom, violation of individual rights and lack of adequate opportunities in a political field might be some of the triggers of political factor of migration. Nonetheless the most overpowering political factor of migration is the onset of wars. Political wars arising from disagreement in common beliefs and tension arising from community upheavals give rise to wars between countries or within the country. This leads to forceful migration and the migrants may take shelter in another country thereby falling under the category of refugees.

### **Demographic Factor**

Overpopulation is a major cause for many people to adapt migration to a host country. Lack of space on an overpopulated house where there is little to no space for their own may lead a person to migrate to other places. Other demographic factors triggering migration may be mortality rates, birth rates, marriage etc.

### **Natural Factor**

One of the earliest known causes of migration is the natural factor. Natural factor of migration has been dominant since the early ages. But it has seen a sudden spike in the last 20 years or so. This is mainly due to the changing climatic conditions arising from global warming.

Natural phenomenon such as drought, flood, famine, volcanic eruption etc. are some of the causes underlying the natural factor of migration.

It is a universally acknowledged fact that relocation is very stressful for a person. It is a recognition that families and communities must be kept intact in the relocation process (Good, 1996). The process of migrating from one location to another is itself arduous and conjures a lot of time and energy of the migrants. As mentioned in the passages above, migration can either be voluntary or involuntary (forced). People often choose to migrate for better opportunities to another location. While on the other hand we have the refugees who despite not having the heart and soul to relocate are left with no other choice than to migrate to a distant location for their own safety. The stress and traumatic experiences of pre-migration and post-migration leave a lasting impact on the mental health of the migrants and the refugees as well. Refugees are often faced with multiple forms of trauma which includes persecution, sexual violence, and life-threatening situations, prior to and during the process of migration. Migrating groups of non-refugees on the other hand have to face disparities with the native inhabitants post migration in the host country. This leads to communal conflicts and a miscommunication between then native and the non-native population of the country. Communal disputes further calls for discrimination against a particular group of people. The sense of loss of identity, loss of hope and depressive episodes follow post migration. The character of Chanu in Ali's *Brick Lane* (2000) is a prime example of a dislocated immigrant who has long lost his charm of the "occidental" and is seen longing for his native home towards the end of the novel. Ali's portrayal of Chanu as a stern orthodox Muslim against the backdrop of a modern London exemplifies the loss of roots in a host country. This is a character who we see leaving his home for a better future in London but never ceases longing for his home back in Bangladesh. This symbolizes the plight of most immigrants in host countries who despite not adapting to the host country they migrate to continue to live there for hopes of a brighter tomorrow.

### **Cultural Miscommunication in a Host Country**

Multiculturalism occurs when there is an overlapping of cultures in a particular area or region. Over the last few decades thousands of people have migrated from one place to another for securing better living options. Most of these migrations are voluntary while some might be forced migration (refugees of war). Migrants tend to settle in a particular area in a host country thus forming a diaspora amongst themselves. This diaspora of immigrants internationally are faced with harsh discrimination and negative attitude from the native population of the country. This increasing number of migrants have led to more severe contacts with members of the host society. This puts the issue of coexistence in the heart of political debate. The migrant feels out of place in the host society and lacks the skill to further initiate affective conversation. Stereotypes play an important role in shaping beliefs, motifs and structure of the immigrant in a host country. Often stereotypes circulating the immigrants tend to portray them in a negative light. These stereotypes arise as a result of the negative attitude of the native population who are considerably aware of the growing rates of immigration in their homeland. The harmony in coexistence finally depends upon the immigrant.

The difference between the minority and the majority in the host society depends on how the immigrant responds to the changing circumstances around him/her. But we often see the immigrant hesitating to cope with the host society as he still is trapped in the sense of 'belonging'. The immigrant is divided between trying to maintain his own native culture and also to adapt to the culture of the host society. This dilemma can turn into feelings of loss of identity and the failure to accustom oneself with the changing times. Often the immigrant is left with a mix of cultures. He stays somewhere between his own culture and a new foreign culture that he vehemently tries to adopt. This results in a multicultural society which is seen in the negative light by the native population of the country. Cultural and communal stereotypes are then unavoidable in the host society against the non-natives.

## **The Dominance of Cultural Motif in Brick Lane and White Teeth**

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* highlights the lives of two sisters Nazneen and Hasina. Ali has put the two protagonist of the novel in two different demographic regions and focuses on their struggle with life, society, culture and loss of identity. Belonging to an orthodox Bengali Muslim family in Bangladesh, both sisters have little to no freedom of their own. Hasina elopes at the young age of sixteen to overcome the patriarchal household she was born into. Nazneen on the other hand was married off to Chanu who was forty years of age. *Brick Lane* prioritizes the problematics of identity, displacement, separation, marginalization, hybridity, marginalization and other such issues through the characters of Bangladeshi origin in a foreign country and how they struggle to make a living amongst a host society. The state of juxtapositioning the cultural beliefs of the native homeland and that of the host society often leads to a loss of cultural identity on the part of the migrant. Chanu's character in the novel is a prime example of the loss of self-identity in a host country. He is often seen brooding over minute things and has decorated his home according to the traditions of his Bangladeshi origin which again shows his longing for the homeland. Chanu finds it difficult to adapt to the culture of the host nation and has a loss of cultural identity throughout the novel when towards the end he finally returns back. Nazneen on the other hand is the polar opposite of her husband Chanu. While coming from a poor orthodox Muslim household, she initially doesn't have any will of her own and often is seen following Chanu's orders and maintaining the house and the children. But her connection to the ice-skating, the television and her affair with Karim spark a change in her. Nazneen has a personality as well as cultural shift which leads her to stay back in London and finally embrace the change in her cultural identity. The conflicts within the self and the host society is what dominates the story of Ali's *Brick Lane*.

Zadie Smith's *White teeth* on the other hand has a stark contrast to the setting of Ali's *Brick Lane*. Smith's debut novel tells the story of three families, the Chalfens, Bowdens and Iqbals. Smith has situated her characters in a lighter and merrier background as compared to Ali's here we see the character of Samad Miah Iqbal and his timid wife Alsana Begum who are every bit of the Muslim Bangladeshi as one can be. We also have the characters of Archie Jones and his wife Clara Bowden who is an immigrant from Jamaica.

Smith tries to show the complex and dynamic culture of London and tries to portray the characters with diverse background and their ability to perceive relationship in the society. Smith introduces the migration impact on first generation migrants as well as the second generation migrants. Samad and Alsana's children are the harbingers of contrasting cultural communities. Magid and Millat are consciously placed in two varying demographic region which has a significant impact on the upbringing of both the children. The characters of Magid and Millat symbolize the two different cultures of Bangladesh and London respectively. In spite of the fact that both are British born, Magid's upbringing in Bangladesh certainly defines his serious and studious character who is much more tied to his native roots as compared to his counterpart Millat. Similarly the character of the second generation immigrant, Irie Jones gives us a hint into the self-consciousness of one's mixed identity in a host country. Irie often feels out-of-place in the host city of London which ultimately leads to her loss of self-identity and self-confidence. Smith's *White Teeth* addresses the issues of multiculturalism in a rather comic way. Smith has often interviewed that her book caught on because it is typically understood as a humorous parody of many ethnic groups (Thomas, 2009).

### **Writing Style of Monica Ali and Zadie Smith**

Monica Ali and Zadie Smith are both woman writers who are immigrants in a foreign country. While Ali focuses on her Bangladeshi roots to fabricate her stories, Smith is often seen bringing elements from her native Caribbean heritage in her characters. Both the authors have taken the task of positioning immigrants in a multicultural setting of London in a positive light. Woman characters are an important aspect of the works of Ali and Smith. The subjugation of woman and their little to no freedom in a patriarchal society takes a central position in most of the works of the two authors. But what really ties the two of them together is the immigrant experience that both have lived themselves and are making their characters alive through the same. For some critics, the novels place a lot of stress on personal experiences rather than exploring the wider range of context that the novels are situated in. In Ali's *Brick Lane* Nazneen's journey from a timid Bangladeshi housewife in a host country to becoming an independent working lady of London takes up most of the pages on the novel. Ali has also portrayed the homesick immigrant through the character of Chanu who ironically keeps brooding over the superiority of his homeland than the rigorous city of London. Loss of identity and cultural heritage are dominant in the novels of Monica Ali. The immigrant's experience of trauma and discrimination in a host country take the front page in Ali's *Brick Lane*. Smith rather focuses on the experience of the community as a whole rather than just a particular individual's experience. The diaspora of immigrants in a foreign country is often reflected in the works of Smith. *White Teeth* symbolizes the phenomenon of multiculturalism through the portrayal of the Bowdens and the Iqbals. The continuous clash between the two communities are time and again brought up by Smith in her novel. Smith paints a picture of how multiculturalism in a host country leads to various consequences which often end in chaos. Ali and Smith tried to question the very philosophy of multicultural calamities that take place in a host society. This overlapping of culture opens the door to discrimination, miscommunication and often hatred towards the non-native section of the society.

Such considerations often emerge from the narrative itself rather than the author's own intentions. An immigrant in a multicultural society is often a victim to social discrimination and even threats in the community. Both Ali and Smith being writers from a non-native culture have tried to picture a more considerate London in the coming future where Cultural miscommunication is no longer a social taboo. After all both the authors have ended their novels on a note of muted optimism. The endings of both novels highlight the fact that there is hope even in despair. Ali concludes *Brick Lane* with Nazneen finding a new way of life in a new country. She is finally able to let go of her previous timid self which chained her desires to a corner. Nazneen's broken fragments of her identity are finally found and nurtured in an unfamiliar yet positive way. Smith's *White Teeth*, though not entirely ending on a positive note as compared to Ali's novel, carries out the search for a better tomorrow through Irie's child. Here the newborn child of mixed heritage and upbringing symbolizes the new beginning of a new generation. Perhaps Smith wanted to put forth her own desire of a better London in the future where cultural miscommunication is overpowered by strong bonds of love and hope. Nonetheless, Ali and Smith through their respective works try hard to pave a way amidst the misconceptions and prejudices surrounding an immigrant to the best of their capabilities. Yet the rising number of immigrants and refugees remain a major concern as of today for the first world countries. In such a scenario the question we really should be asking is whether the West is ready to accept the jeopardizing of their native culture by the Oriental just for the sake of being "polite"?

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