

Sexual Politics and Symbolic Annihilation of Working Women in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*: A Textual Analysis

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Abstract

The article explores the representation of female workforce in *Brick Lane*, both in their personal and professional capacity. The article highlights the writer's attempt at creative placement of working women in the pink-collar jobs and in the conventionally preconceived set of skills, interests, self-perceptions, behaviors, and appearance. It also analyzes the depiction of working women's incompetency at managing their professional and personal life on their own. The article discusses the trivialization, condemnation and omission of working women through their portrayal in the under-study novel. The analysis is based on the application of Gaye Tuchman's theoretical concept of symbolic annihilation, and it also utilizes the ideas of Kate Millet as presented in *Sexual Politics* for analyzing the patriarchal power play in intimate heterosexual relationships. The analysis is divided into three sections-first section discusses depiction of working women living within Bangladesh, second section analyses portrayal of Bengali women working in London and the last section examines patriarchal politics of control within romantic and sexual relationships. The analysis utilizes Catherine Belsey's *Textual Analysis* method to explore the data from the lenses of curated theoretical framework.

Key Words: symbolic annihilation, sexual politics, Brick Lane, Monica Ali, South Asia, South Asian literature

Introduction

In recent decades, South Asia has witnessed a significant increase in the number of women entering the workforce, particularly in Bangladesh (International Labour Organization, 2018). Increasingly, women are joining the workforce across diverse fields, driven by governmental support and the growing necessity of dual-income households (World Bank, 2020). When women join the workforce, they gain more control over their lives, challenge

traditional gender roles, and assert greater independence at home and in society (Kabeer, 1999; Donald et al., 2017). Representation of working women, in literature, in diverse fields with diverse set of skills sets an impressive precedent for young girls. They aim to achieve autonomy in their lives and enter into professional fields which are conventionally associated with men. Misrepresentation or limited representation of working women, in literature, on the other hand can be detrimental for young female readers as it can limit their dreams and self-perceptions. The primary objective of this paper is to examine the representation of working women in *Brick Lane* through the theoretical lenses of Gaye Tuchman and Kate Millett. It specifically investigates how the text depicts Bengali working women operating within Bangladesh and in England. The paper also takes Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* perspective to examine intimate, romantic and sexual relationships as a power tool to symbolically annihilate women.

In South Asia, patriarchal values are deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and religious traditions, often reinforced through literature. Fiction, particularly novels, has frequently depicted women in domestic and nurturing roles, while men are portrayed as breadwinners, skilled workers and leaders (Thapan, 2009). These narratives reflect societal norms that confine women to the private sphere, ignoring their contributions in public life and reinforcing patriarchal dominance.

Chaubey and Bhat (2020) argue that both male and female authors have stereotypically represented South Asian women in literature. Female authors engage in this practice often as a means to gain societal acceptance, maintain their positions within a male-dominated literary tradition or to achieve international recognition, as stereotypical representations are easily digestible by the global audiences (Mohanty, 1991). Conventionally expected representations not only set a narrow ideal for South Asian female readers but it also disregards South Asian women's major contribution to economy and their complex identities and agency.

While some South Asian English fiction offers nuanced depictions of women, many continue to reinforce regressive gender norms. Working women are frequently overlooked, diminishing their societal and economic contributions. As Sunder Rajan (1993) notes, analyzing these portrayals is crucial to understanding how literature perpetuates patriarchal structures and limits the recognition of women's multifaceted roles in society. Such critical evaluations are essential to challenging these stereotypes and promoting more inclusive representations.

Methodology

The theories of Gaye Tuchman and Kate Millet are employed as a critical view point to delve into the text. Andrade et al. proclaim that theory resides at the center of a scholarly research, “supporting its scholarly relevance, identity and legitimacy” (2023). Gaye Tuchman, in her chapter *The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media*, argues that women are significantly omitted, trivialized, condemned and eventually symbolically annihilated in mass media. She proposes that mass media represents women only in traditional roles like inside home and in relation to men, as child bearers, mothers or home-makers. Working women, if represented, are always exhibited in the shadow of male characters as subordinates, clerics or performing other pink-collar jobs. According to England, Budig, and Folbre (2002), pink-collar jobs refer to roles traditionally associated with women, often characterized by lower pay, limited advancement opportunities, and a focus on caregiving or service-related tasks, such as nursing, teaching, or administrative support. She identifies that the harm of such depiction is that we do not encourage young women to be independent. We do not instill in them to pursue training, education or other means to come into positions of power rather we reiterate to them dependence on men, which makes the women believe that they are incapable to live without male guidance.

Kate Millet uses the term politics in reference to intimate and romantic encounters. She argues that politics in this scenario refers to “power-structured relationships,” the dynamic between two individuals or groups “where one group of persons is controlled by another” (2000, p.23). Millet proposes that “coitus” apparently seems to be a biological, physical activity but it does not happen in a vacuum rather it is charged and impacted by the “variety of attitudes and values to which culture subscribes...” (p.23).

The study traces symbolic annihilation and sexual politics occasions in *Brick Lane* through Catherine Belsey’s textual analysis method. Textual analysis is employed to examine the meanings of the words, sentences, and passages. Belsey, in *Critical Practice* states that textual analysis is a “method that involves a close encounter with the work itself, an examination of the details without bringing to them more presuppositions than we can help” (1991, 160).

Analysis

Section I

Bengali Women in the Workforce -Living in Bangladesh: Professional Engagements and Domestic Responsibilities

The Burden of Appearance

The objectification of women's appearance in South Asia is a pervasive issue with deep cultural and societal roots. Women are frequently judged based on their looks, leading to significant psychological and social consequences. In the very first chapter of the novel, Hasina is introduced as an extremely beautiful girl, she has a “her heart shaped face,” “pomegranate - pink lips and liquid eyes.” Even at age of six, “everyone stared at her, women, men and children.” Hasina’s beauty is portrayed as an ominous trait for her, so much so that even before she turned eleven, older women declared that “such beauty could have no earthly purpose but trouble” (Ali, 2003, p.43).

Similarly, Lovely is consumed with her looks for not being used for her benefit, as she says, “I wish I wasn't beautiful. I wish I didn't have all this beauty and nothing to be done with it” (p.341). Lovely believes her potential lies in her looks and not in her intelligence or creativity. Lovely constantly compares her looks with that of her best friend, Betty, she asks Hasina, “do you think Betty is more beautiful than me?” (p.206). Renu, Hasina’s colleague, considers herself ugly and, therefore, unworthy of a partner, she tells Hasina, “Who will marry these bones?” (p.138).

Women’s looks are not just a part of their appearance rather it is a defining factor in their success or downfall. Lovely belongs to the upper class therefore her beauty is a privilege for her, she gets to marry an established, upper-class man and her best friend, Betty, still competes in pageants after marriage and wins them for being exceptionally beautiful. In contrast, low-income women, in the narrative, cannot afford to be beautiful as men get attracted to them and bring

trouble for them. Mr. Chowdhury instructs Hasina that “it is you who must take care” because “these boys around pretty girls like wax to flame, they cannot help it” (p.141). Women are held responsible for men’s incorrect actions because they do not guard themselves properly. Defining female characters primarily by their appearance trivializes their complexity and reinforces stereotypes. The omission of female characters who view themselves beyond physical traits limits narrative diversity and perpetuates narrow portrayals of women's identities and aspirations.

Sex-Based Duties, Skills, And Authority

Bangladesh had two female prime ministers, the highest position of authority in a country, by 2003, when the novel *Brick Lane* was published. Bangladesh has a good number of female entrepreneurs also, because of Bengali governments’ women empowering initiatives like the National Women Entrepreneurs Development Policy (NWEDP) and the National Women Development Policy (NWDP). Women lead initiatives have hired almost 8.4 million individuals. Bengali women are making strides in a number of industries, including manufacturing, services, e-commerce, agriculture, and technology (Muntaha, 2023). Despite the rise in women entrepreneurs and women working in diverse fields, we don’t see their representation in diasporic Bengali English literature (Muntaha, 2023). All females, working professionally, in *Brick Lane*, are performing stereotypical jobs of sewing, stitching, cleaning, competing in pageants and working as midwives and prostitutes.

Hasina sews in a garment factory; she does not begin her profession out of her passion or to implement her skill rather she resorts to sewing to support herself after running away from her beating husband, she writes to Nazneen, “you remember Amma always tells a handful of rice a day. I have managed it...” (Ali, 2003, p.49). Hasina depends on a male, an uncle of her landlady, to get an apartment and she relies on another man, Mr. Chowdhury, to secure a job in the garment factory. Initially, being completely unskilled, she works as a helper, she tells her sister, “When I was helper run around with thread and cloth, I was just girl,” (p.137) and gradually she is assigned to work on a machine and this transition makes her feel important, she tells Nazneen, “I am machinist real woman job now” (p.134). She feels child-like excitement and nervousness towards her work tasks, she writes to Nazneen, “my machine so new and beautiful, I hardly

daring to touch and put my finger mark on, when I sitting down and start it know me for beginner and prick the thumbs (p.137). Hasina's reaction to her sewing machine reflects that working women easily feel fulfilled with minor tasks and simple equipment. This representation trivializes women's ability to manage big workplace operations and handle complex machinery.

Within garment factory, men and women's working areas and work assignments are separated and varying degree of importance is assigned to each gender's work. Hasina writes, "one place is for machine, I go there, another for cutting and finishing, men go there, small room for manager and paper work" (p.137). The manager job, the authority position, is assigned to a man. Women, in the novel, consider their work to be easier and less demanding than men's job, though Hasina clearly mentions that all workers-male and female work for 12 hours, "8 o'clock is the start time, all must come few minute before and 8 o'clock exact they unlock gate" (p.137), yet the female characters have internalized that men are handling difficult tasks, Hasina informs Nazneen in her letter, "no men doing machining, ... they make pattern and cut cloth, these are difficult job, also they iron, that job too dangerous for women, we do not understand the electricity, so you see how it is..." (p.139). Depicting female characters nativity in thinking men's work is hard and dangerous while their own is simple, not only trivializes their critical thinking capacity but also sets a limiting standard for young girls. It suggests they're only capable of easy jobs and will always be overshadowed by men, who are naturally better suited for handling danger and difficulty.

Gendered Occupational Diversification, Competency and Professional Ethics

Male characters, working in Bangladesh, in the novel, have diverse set of jobs, from position of authority to subordinates- a father in one family is a "clerk at district court" (p.135), Zainab's "husband works at district court" as a judge (p.137). Hasina's father, Hamid, supervises "the laborers in the paddy fields" (p.12) and Hasina's husband's uncle is "very high up at railway" (p.19). Hasina's second husband, Ahmed, "is supervisor for night shift" in a shoe factory (p.155). Lovely's husband, James, works in "Bangla National Plastic" (p.207) at a senior position as he is assigned a driver and he is able to afford a maid and a cook for his family. Mr.

Chowdhury, Hasina's landlord, "have many businesses" (p.147), owns a "Toyota Land Cruiser," and has sons settled in "America" (p.141).

Men excel at the work they perform, like Malek, he joins railway and Hasina tells Nazneen that her husband has a "first class job in railway company" and "nobody smarter than my husband" (p.19), she later adds, "Husband is do very well at his work. He have already promotion" (p.41). In garment factory, Abdul "is a pattern cutter" and Hasina is surer of his success than her own, she writes about him to Nazneen in these words, "he is great study man like your husband. One day whole entire factory come in his charge. He have the brain for it and he jump on detail. I give you example. Every day sock and belt are match. Brown sock for brown belt black sock for black" (145). Just based on his appearance, Hasina believes that he will be successful later in life, whereas in contrast, women discuss that they need to be careful with their dress and makeup not to catch other gender's attention towards them. Zaid, the cook, is so competent at his work that Lovely remains worried that he will "leave for the other job" (p.208). Male characters have diverse jobs and varied set of skills as it is expected from them in the society, in contrast, female characters, professionally, are performing low-paying jobs with the conventionally expected skills of sewing, stitching and cleaning.

Hasina, initially, works in a garment factory, all her colleagues-Shahnaz, Renu, Aleya does the same job as her, of stitching. Female characters are portrayed as less competent at executing their work tasks and maintaining work ethics. Hasina tells Nazneen in the letter, "Renu is miss out the overtime, she have make mistakes this week, she mess up some shirts, putting collars on wrong way, someone report for chewing betel as well..." (p.140). Shahnaz keeps talking about makeup at work, Hasina says, she has "skill in cosmetics". Women consistently gossip and belittle each other at work.

When Hasina loses her job, she is unable to survive on her own and fails in her entrepreneurial efforts. She tells Nazneen, "I make whistles out from bamboo and I take outside and sit with them nobody wanting to buy... I go to bazaar for cloth straps and I make dolls. Then I go to Motijheel and sit on pavement police kick the box and they make threat" (p.152).

Portraying Hasina consistently fail in her earning efforts is trivializing of women's ability to fend for themselves without a male support.

Apart from garment factory, female work is shown in begging and brick breaking. Hasina observes a "beggar woman lying on the street" who "moves along with shuffling and uses hands as a paddle..." but even her job is supervised and controlled by men, Hasina writes, "after it gets dark, men come and put on handcart and take her somewhere" (p.52). Among the brick breakers "most is woman and they look hungry", Hasina informs her sister, they squat "over red bricks with little stone hammer, so huge pile wait for this little hammer. Like you take teaspoon to empty lake..." (p.140). Women's work in the narrative is mostly manual labor with less opportunity for creative or intellectual expression.

Hasina also works as a prostitute for a little while to earn money by the help of Hussain. Apart from Hasina, Hussain has "the other girl over near Baru bazaar and two other who go around for work, these he call floating girl" (p.154). None of the women can be seen holding a position of authority in professional life or even requiring some mental intelligence and creativity to perform their work. All female characters, whether of upper class or from working class, rely on their body to earn money.

These limited professional roles of women, in the novel, set limited professional ideals for young South Asian female readers. Harri Das and Mallika Das (2009) assert that mass media and literature influence young children by providing role models and information beyond what they get from family and school (Powell, 1995). Myths about womanhood, in mass media, can offer new insights into how women see themselves and are seen by others (Mann, 2000). "Besides family and friends, mass media probably has the biggest impact on our ideas about gender" (Lipps, 1988, p. 17). Job goals are strongly influenced by what society sees as suitable for men and women (Powell, 1995). Many of these cultural norms come from popular books and mass-media (Cherland, 1994). *Brick Lane's* narrow portrayal of women's careers and independence offers young South Asian girls only limited role models to follow.

Female Envy and Competition

Along with incompetency and manual labor, another trope that consistently gets repeated in the text is female rivalry. Mikaela Kiner claims in her article, in *Harvard Business Review*, that women internalize patriarchal ideas that suggest they are less strong, competent, and capable than men, a phenomenon known as internalized sexism. These beliefs about their roles and capabilities are unconsciously absorbed, influencing how women perceive and judge one another. This internalized sexism can cause women to mistreat, underestimate, and distance themselves from other women, as a way to boost their own status and power in a male-dominated society (2020).

Women constantly belittle each other at their workplace in the novel. When Hasina is accused of having a romantic affair at the garment factory, other women stand against her, she writes to her sister, “I ask Khalida for scissor and she pass with sharp end open and pricks on my hand. when I make a cry sound is only surprise all holding up hands and hiding smile. I go outside and really cry” (p.145). Even when Renu comes to console her for others’ behavior, she does not believe in Hasina’s truthfulness, Renu tells Hasina to “never mind these girls they ... Dont want to go near a bad one,” Hasina says, “she meaning me to be the bad one. I explain everything but she just pulling on tooth” (p.145). Renu is judgmental in her consolation and she does nothing to correct others’ perception about Hasina.

Shahnaz constantly bullies her female colleagues. She tells Hasina that her “lips too pink, too big, can look impure” (p.142); she mocks Renu that she will “end up breaking bricks” (p.140) and when Aleya says that her husband wants her to wear burkha, she makes fun of her behind her back and says, “why worry? nobody wants to look at that monkey face” (p.139). Hasina tells Nazneen that “Shahnaaz is such tease” (p.140). Zainab judges garment factory girls as immodest, she says to Hasina, “150 girls in one factory getting pregnant... all floating like ducks” (p.142).

Lovely, who is an established man’s wife, is jealous of her best friend, Betty, for being able to continue her independent lifestyle and job as a model even after marriage. Lovely says that Betty is “only so high up in beauty pageant because of father name” (p.206). Kiner says

that women's attitude of superseding each other arise from a sense of "one seat at a table" which means that women hold a feeling that they have limited and less opportunities (2020). Kiner also informs her readers that while she was writing her book, she learnt through her research that women do not always despise each other rather they do like healthy competition, and having a fair fight for position, promotion and projects. These healthy competitions among women and a collective effort are rarely depicted in mass-media mediums (2020).

Gendered Self-Concepts

Character's self-perception about their own personality is quite important for analysis as it sets ideals for the readers to form the same standards of perception for themselves. The male characters have high self-perception in the narrative and in comparison, women have very low self-esteem. Malek joins railway as untrained personnel but he is not daunted by it, he tells Hasina, "What matter is being smart" (p.19). Malek believes he is smart enough to excel and he is proven correct as he does get promotion very quickly. Abdul, Hasina's male colleague at garment factory, plans to excel at his job, he tells her, "If you want to rise up in management you must jump on detail like this..." (p.146). None of the female workers discuss excelling at their work or gaining promotions.

Hasina devalues her professional skills, she says in a disappointing tone, "Nobody have machining job. This is all training I have" (p.152). When she is unable to find a sewing job in entire Dhakka she feels lost for not succeeding in her earning attempts. Her constant despondency during her joblessness reflects her lack of belief in herself. Orth & Robins assert that believing in one's ability is a core indicator of high self-esteem, whereas a lack of such belief often reflects low self-esteem. High self-esteem individuals tend to possess confidence in their abilities, which fosters resilience and a proactive approach to challenges (2014).

One strong reflection of low-self-perception, in the novel, is women's constant devaluation of their own gender. When Amma gives birth to Nazneen, she informs her husband dejectedly:

“A girl, said Rupban.

I know, never mind, said Hamid, what can you do?” (p.10)

In South Asia, the birth of a girl child is often less desired due to deep-rooted cultural, economic, and social factors (Das Gupta et al.,2003). Hasina after marrying Malek tells Nazneen, “I pray for son” (p.20). Amma constantly tells her daughters to endure because, she says, “if God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men” (p.72). Women throughout the narrative, constantly express their inability to get away from suffering because of their gender, Hasina writes to Nazneen, “I do my best but I am only a woman” (p.149). Renu also expresses that she is suffering because she is a woman, “anyone say anything they like, because I am woman alone. I put hair on earth to suffer” (p.138). Hasina's constant blaming of herself for her adversities also reflects her lack of self-valuing. When Mr. Chowdhury rapes her, she says to Nazneen, “I bring shame on self” (p.150) and when she has to run away from her home because her husband beats her, she says, “everything has happen is because of me” (p.151). When Ahmed expresses his wish to marry Hasina, she does not consider herself worthy of him, she tells him, “I am a low woman. I am nothing I am nothing. I am all that I have I can give you nothing” (p.156). Research by Josephs, Markus, and Tafarodi suggests that internalized societal stereotypes and negative beliefs about one's gender contribute to lower self-esteem. This internalization leads women to devalue their gender as a way of coping with perceived inferiority or societal pressures (1992).

Gendered Behavior and Interests

Women Seeking Male Saviors

The male savior attitude, often depicted in literature and media, suggests that women require rescue or guidance from men to overcome difficulties or achieve fulfillment. This perspective perpetuates gender typecasts by portraying men as inherently strong and capable

while women are seen as passive and dependent. Such narratives can undermine women's autonomy and reinforce patriarchal structures.

One of the two main characters in the novel is Hasina, and in contrast to her sister Nazneen, she is presented as a rebellious and independent woman. Nazneen felt an urge to be “an independent woman” (p.84) after reading about Hasina’s life; yet there is a contradiction in this idea of independent Hasina when her life pattern is critically viewed. Her initial action of elopement with Malek, to marry, is shifting of her dependence from her father to her husband. Malek earns and financially runs the home; he also controls the authority at home. Hasina writes about her husband to her sister, “Everything good between us now. I do not let my tongue make trouble for it as my husband say. Just because man is kind to wife it do not mean she can say what she like. If women understanding this, no one will beat” (p.20). Her husband controls her expression of opinions. Once her husband starts beating her, she attempts to run away from him; her female landlady advises her that “it is better to get beaten by one's own husband than by stranger” (p.49). The landlady means that if she leaves her husband her life outside in the world is going to be more difficult and the unrelated people will create trouble for her so it is better for her to endure inside home. Hasina does not listen to her landlady and still leaves her husband which momentarily reflects her act of achieving independence.

After leaving Malek, she consistently seeks for men to protect and support her. Mr. Chowdhury, her second landlord, becomes her savior, she tells her sister about “the job he was going to get for her in a garment factory” (p.62). And since Hasina was on her own, without a legal male guardian, her sister has apprehensions about her well-being, Nazneen thinks to herself, “about the danger” Hasina “was in and she was in danger” (p.62). Nazneen’s husband tells his wife that Mr. Chowdhury sounds to be a “responsible” man and therefore Hasina “will be under his protection” (p.62). Hasina herself relies on Mr. Chowdhury, she tells her sister, “He is father to me, always he tells anything you need, anytime you in trouble come to me, this is kind of man, everyone giving him respect” (p.134). And in another letter, she writes, “he look out for me, so concern for me” (p.144).

Once Hasina joins the garment factory she relies on her colleague, Abdul, for protection, she says, “Abdul taking care for me,” she further adds, he “walk me home ... he looking out for me” (p.145-146). After she is kicked out of the factory for behaving inappropriately, she then starts relying on Hussain for survival. Hussain finds her work as a prostitute, she writes to her sister, “someone not want to pay Hussain deal with them” (p.154) and she adds, “Hussain still looking out for me. he the one making sure I get the money, if he not look out anyway take what they like. (p.153). Hasina believes that she would not be able to get her self-earned money, if Hussain is not at her back. Once she meets Ahmed, a shoe factory supervisor, she then hopes to depend on him. Hussain also suggests her to marry Ahmed, since he would die soon due to his spoiled liver, he tells her, “You are damaged past repair what chance you has also? ... I cannot last much longer. Who will protect you if not him? I let you go. This life is finish. Begin another...” (p.156). Hasina believing in the idea that she would not be able to survive on her own, marries Ahmed.

After marrying Ahmed, Hasina uses the phrase “I have come inside” referring to the belief that she is in protection of her husband because previously she was on her own without a legal male guardian and earning herself, therefore, she was outside. She further adds that “I love the walls keep me here” so basically, she loves being dependent on her husband and staying as a housewife (p.157). She becomes a maid in a rich house after her husband, Ahmed, leaves her. As a mid she lives quite an independent and comfortable life, yet by the end of novel, she elopes with Ziad, the cook in the same house; once again proving that she has an internalized belief that she is not self-sufficient and independent in the true sense.

Section II

Bengali Immigrant Women in London: Representation of Paid Workers and Domestic Laborers

Female Professional Work and the Limited Agency

In *Brick Lane*, Bengali immigrant women who work to earn money are not independent agents of their lives rather their lives and their work is under complete authority of their husbands. Nazneen who is the lead character of the novel spends most of her life staying inside the house as an entirely domestic woman. She repeatedly asks her husband to let her work, “Some of the women are doing sewing at home...Razia can get work for me” (p.166). But Chanu refuses by using the excuse of honor and respectability in community, he responds, “if the wife is working it is only because the husband cannot feed them. Lucky for you I am an educated man” (p.167). Nazneen even required her husband’s permission to learn English language and she was denied to do so.

Patriarchy has historically employed various tools to maintain control over women, including restricting their access to education and employment. These restrictions serve to limit women's economic independence and intellectual growth, thereby perpetuating gender inequality. For instance, Nussbaum (2000) argues that denying women educational opportunities confines them to traditional gender roles, reinforcing patriarchal structures and hindering societal progress. Similarly, Kabeer (2005) highlights that prohibiting woman from participating in the workforce not only stifles their personal development but also undermines the economic potential of entire communities.

Nazneen starts working professionally once her husband deems it right. Chanu brings her a sewing machine because their money problems become intense and also, he plans to go back to Dhakka and they need money for the air fare. What is more interesting is that Chanu is effectively manipulative in making his wife believe that he is actually fulfilling his wife’s wish to work by bringing her a sewing machine and the paid work as well, he introduced the sewing machine to his family in the following manner: “don't I always do as you ask?...see what I've got for your mother ... she's the boss woman now... Look. Look inside the box...Nazneen came close and squatted beside the box inside there was a sewing machine” (p.173-174).

Once Nazneen starts working, her entire work and payment remains in control of her husband. Nazneen works tirelessly but it is her husband who keeps control of the work and

makes sure that his family is conditioned to believe that he is performing the important tasks in this sewing work. “For two whole months, she did not even know how much she had earned” (p.190). Her hard-earned money also remains in his control and eventually when she does start to keep her earned money, she has to hide it from her husband’s frivolous spending to use them at rightful places. She has not the agency to use her money freely for her own needs or stop Chanu from spending them on useless things. She hides her money “inside the jar”, “beneath the kitchen sink,” “on the high shelf,” etc. (p.195).

Another professionally working woman is Razia. Her work is sewing as well, the stereotypical feminine work. According to Lauzen (2018), showing stereotypical female working skills, in mass media, contributes to a narrow perception of women's abilities, influencing public opinion and policy in ways that disadvantage women, ultimately affecting their self-concept and career choices. Like Nazneen, Razia wishes to work because of the lack of resources for her kids but she terribly fears about her husband’s reaction. She tells Nazneen, “if I get a job, he will kill me. He will kill me kindly just once slipped across hair. That is the sort of man he is” (p.112). She adds that if she goes to garment factory without his approval, her husband “will come to the factory and slaughter me like a lamb” (p.112). Razia starts working only after the death of her husband. She tells Nazneen:

he is dead.

What do you mean? said Nazneen,

my husband is dead...I can get that job now, no slaughter man to slaughter me now.
(p.127-128)

Razia does work with full dedication but she does not seem to enjoy her work because of the health issues it gets her. She tells Nazneen, “See the joints. Arthritis. She returned the hands to press against the ache. And my back is killing. Sewing all day and all day. Children take the money; I get the arthritis” (p.170).

Razia is someone with much more agency and vigor than any other female character in London, yet it appears that she has internalized her working skill to be only sewing. We don’t see her changing her field of work to get better health wise. It is by the very end of the narrative that we see her working as a full-time entrepreneur, where she operates the entire sewing

business with Nazneen, Jorina and Hanufa working for her as employees. Once Razia owns her business, she does not depend upon men to bring her work assignments rather she herself moves around in the city to get sewing assignments for her company, as Nazneen narrates about her, “Razia had been the one to set it up. Walked into Fusion Fashions, bold as maynah bird, and asked for work. She cleared out of the sweatshop. She got on the bus and went to distant lands: Tooting, Ealing, Southall, Wembley. She came back with orders, swatches, samples, patterns, beads, laces, feathers, trims, leathers, trims, fake fur, rubber, and crystals” (p.461).

The only female character that has a non-stereotypical work is Mrs. Islam but her work is neither lawful nor she operates it uprightly. Mrs. Islam is a usurer, who is intelligent enough to run her husband’s entire business secretly without his knowledge but not independent enough to surpass his control on their business. Razia tells, about Mrs Islam’s intricate way of controlling their business without her husband’s knowledge, in following words:

Her husband would bring his associates home and they would do their deals there. Mrs. Islam was always present. She kept in the back, serving and tidying. But she knew what they had come to talk about and she pulled the string. The handkerchiefs were how she did it. She signaled with them. Spotty one meant no. White one for yes. Lace edging for one year contract. Plain muslin for two years. That's sort of thing anyway. (p.89)

The above lines reflect that even if women are more intelligent and capable than their male partners, they always have to keep the charade of being the second one in the relationship to keep the family together and make the men feel that they are in control, as at one-point Razia tells Nazneen, “men like to be proved right. We must go out of our way to show them how right they are” (p.62).

Mrs Islam relies on bullying, manipulation and power tactics to earn her money. She frightens people into giving her large profit ratios over her lent money by using her sons. Razia tells Nazneen, “Amina... she is paying 33%. ... if she doesn't come up with it next time, plus extra interest as punishment, the son will break her arm” (p. 118). Similarly, when Chanu, Nazneen’s husband, borrows money from her, Mrs. Islam threatens them repeatedly to squeeze out as much money from them as possible. Mrs. Islam, along with her sons, at one point threatens Nazneen as is evident in the following incident:

The sound of breaking glass shot like iced water down Nazneen's spine. She looked up. You are upsetting my mother, said son number two. When she gets upset, I get upset. Sometimes I break things.

The top of the showcase was caved in. A little cloud of glass dust showered the pottery figures.

Sometimes I break things as well, said son number one.

...Mrs Islam motioned to Nazneen to get moving, 'Quick. Two hundred pounds and settle it. (p.423)

Depicting females being engaged in illegitimate work and having manipulative work ethics in novels can have a detrimental impact on young female readers by perpetuating harmful stereotypes and shaping negative perceptions of women's roles in society. Such portrayals may lead young readers to internalize the belief that success for women is often associated with unethical behavior, thereby undermining their confidence in pursuing legitimate and ethical career paths. According to Trites (2000), literature plays a crucial role in the socialization of young readers, and consistent negative depictions can distort their understanding of gender and morality. Furthermore, Gilligan (1982) argues that exposure to manipulative female characters can erode the development of a strong moral framework in young women.

The Core Female Duty-Home and Family

According to Ferree (1990), societal norms and gender roles often position women as the primary caregivers and managers of household responsibilities. This expectation persists despite women's increasing participation in the workforce, reinforcing traditional views that align femininity with domestic and familial duties. Bengali immigrant women, living in London, in the narrative, are excessively and elaborately portrayed to be the sole carer of household, family, children and husband.

Nazneen works single-handedly and tirelessly inside her home to manage domestic tasks though repeatedly she appears to be exasperated with endless domestic chores. In one instance, she reminds herself of the day's tasks in these words:

She should be getting on with the evening meal. The lamb curry was prepared. She had made it last night with tomatoes and new potatoes. There was chicken saved in the freezer ...There was still the dal to make and the vegetable dishes, the spices to grind, the rice to wash and the saucepan to prepare...the tablecloth had some spots to be scrubbed out... The rugs which she had held out of the window earlier and beaten with a wooden spoon needed to be put down again (p.14-15).

Chanu, Nazneen's husband does not gauge the quality of their relationship based on the understanding between them rather he likes his wife because of her ability to take care of their house, he tells one of his friends, "She is a good worker, cleaning and cooking and all that...a girl from the village, totally unspoilt" (p.18). He calls her unspoilt because she always follows his instructions and never complains about anything. Chanu does not like her physical appearance but is satisfied because she could bear him children, he says, "Hips are a bit narrow, but wide enough... to carry children" (p.17).

Even when she gets tired of her domestic life and felt that "she was trapped inside this body, inside this room, inside this flat, inside this concrete slab of untorned humanity" (p.68), and when "her head felt to bursting. The children and Chanu, her sister, the cleaning, the cooking, the sewing, the worrying. It all took up space and her thoughts circled" (p.250), she reprimanded herself by telling herself that "there was nothing else that God wanted her to do... there was nothing really to complain of" and reminded herself that if she felt the urge to do something with her life beyond her domestic duties, "the trick was to ignore it, turn your back on it like Amma (p.92-93). Even when she starts professionally working and consistently worked for hours on her sewing machine, she single-handedly took care of her children and her house. Hochschild and Machung (2012) use the term *second shift* for this dynamic in which women handle most domestic responsibilities, including the emotional and physical care of family members along with managing financial responsibilities, they argue that this dynamic contributes to the persistence of gender inequality and limit women's autonomy within the household.

All immigrant working women start their money-making endeavors to support their children. Their personal lives and professional work consistently and entirely revolve around fulfilling the needs of their kids. They neither have a domestic identity of their own nor a professional uniqueness beyond their kids. When Nazneen's son gets ill, she thinks to herself that "he was the centre. The world had rearranged itself around this new core... Without him, life

would not be possible. He was on the inside and all else looked in” (p.106). Nazneen sees her life’s meaningfulness only through motherhood. Even when she starts making money, she never buys anything for herself rather she thinks that the money she has made “some she would give it to Shahana (her daughter) for the things she coveted, shampoo and lotion and slides for hair” (p.195). She works for Razia’s entrepreneurial business to “support the children” (p.463).

Nazneen continuously bear the emotional burden of her husband’s and her children’s mental breakdowns. “Chanu never addressed his threats directly to his eldest daughter. Nazneen was the preferred intermediary” (p.163) and when Shahana expressed her frustration, “she kicked the furniture... and most of all she kicked her mother” (p.169). Nazneen never stops her daughter from hitting her rather she lets her do that to vent her anger. When Chanu wanted to go to Dhakka with the entire family, Nazneen thought that she would refuse him to make the things “right for the girls” (p.198). Nazneen refuses to marry Karim because, she says, “I have to think of them (her girls) first” (p.431). According to Erickson (2005) women’s emotional labor involves managing the emotional needs and well-being of family members which leads to their emotional exhaustion and impact their mental health. When Nazneen inquires Karim that why he wants to marry her, he does not tell her about her impressive personality traits rather says, “she was his real thing. A Bengali wife, a Bengali mother, an idea of home...” (p.433). Even in love, Karim likes her being the conventional South Asian wife and mother.

Other female working women are also fixated with idea of “making life for ... children” (p.462) like Razia and Mrs. Islam. Razia tells Nazneen, “I have to go back to work, the children need money” (p.211). Women’s life, as reflected in *Brick Lane*, is so consumed with their kids that they even neglect their own and their friend’s well-being. When Razia informs Nazneen about her husband’s abuse, and his very controlled provision of domestic resources, Nazneen suggests her to “make it up with him... for the children's sake” (p.114). Razia has absolutely no value for herself or for her work, she just wants to make sure that her children are provided for, she says, “what else is this body for I'm just using it up now for my children. Only thing I care about is they don't have to do this same thing as me. Making a nice home as well. New chairs, new sofa, no more second-hand toothbrush for my kid this is what I'm working for” (p.171). She is eventually able to make enough money and “Razia spent her money on her children and on her

flat” (p.407). Even by the very end of narrative when she runs her entire business, she takes care of her house as well, as the texts writes, “Razia had her washing out on a line tied between an overflow pipe and iron hook” (p.463). Mrs. Islam is an old and ailing woman who has grown up sons yet she works her manipulative ways to collect money for them to have an easy life. She tells Nazneen that her husband “was no use at all” and she has “provided for them (her children), not too little and not too much either” (p.286).

Husband as the Primary Authority

Nazneen consistently puts effort to oblige and obey her husband. South Asian women are often socialized to believe that they must submit to and please their husbands. This cultural expectation is deeply rooted in traditional values and gender roles. According to Chadda and Deb (2013), such beliefs contribute to the persistence of gender inequality and limit women's autonomy within the household. Even when Abba married Nazneen to Chanu without asking for her approval, she tells Abba, “I hope I can be a good wife like Amma” (p.12). Amma was an obedient wife and Nazneen for the longest time did the same. Nazneen takes care of Chanu like her child. “Nazneen knelt to the side with a razor blade in her hand. It was time to cut her husband's corns again” (p.33). “Nazneen clipped hair from her husband's nose” (p.164). When he spoke, she always agreed with him, “If you say so, husband, she had begun to answer him like this” (p.90). When she walked with him, she always was a follower, “Channu would push the pram and she would walk a step behind” (p.82), she “walked a step behind her husband down brick lane” (p.223); also “she followed a step behind him across the estate and into the concrete valley that cradled the meeting hall” (p.390).

Nazneen behaves in a silent, submissive and obedient manner towards any and all of her husband's actions. In the initial time period of her marriage, she feels lucky to have a husband who “was kind and never beat her” (p.92). She conditions herself to always make sure not to displease him because it would be her fault to get beaten by her husband. She tells herself, “If Chanu came home this evening and found the place untidy and the spices not even ground.... a wife could reasonably be beaten for a lesser offence...so, it was foolish to assume he would never beat her...” (p.17). Whenever Chanu forbids her from doing rightful things for herself, she

always submits without any complain or displeasure. Nazneen asks Chanu that she “would like to learn some English,” he responds that “It will come. Don't worry about it. Where is the need anyway?” (p.31). Similarly, he instructs her not to go out because he will arrange everything for her, as is evident in the following instance:

she did not often go out. Why should you go out, said Chanu? If you go out, ten people will say I saw her walking on the street and I will look like a fool. Personally, I don't mind if you go out, but these people are so ignorant. What can you do?

She never said anything to this.

Besides, I get everything for you that you need from the shops.
Anything you want, you only have to ask.
She never said anything to this.

I don't stop you from doing anything. I am westernized now. It is lucky for you that you married an educated man. That was a stroke of luck.

She carried on with her chores. (p.38-39)

In the above passage, Chanu's insistence on managing all external activities for his wife is a control tactic disguised as care and concern. By restricting her movements under the guise of societal expectations Chanu reinforces her dependence on him, limiting her autonomy. This form of control is discussed by Johnson (1995), who highlights how men often use protective rationales to justify the subjugation of women, thereby maintaining power dynamics. His assertion that she is "lucky" to have married an educated man further entrenches his dominance and her subordination.

Chanu did not just control his wife but he even controls how his daughters would behave and dress up and Nazneen hardly ever speaks against his actions. Gaye Tuchman in her chapter says when women are shown to be consumed with domestic responsibilities and activities, they are not depicted to have “authority-even inside the house” (p.150). For his daughter, “Chanu had ordered skirt and no trousers. Yesterday both the girls had to put trousers beneath their uniforms. It depended where Chanu directed his outrage” (p.245).

Same is the case with Razia, while her husband is alive, he wholly controls her and her children's life, even inside the house. He denounces his wife "as a wanton house keeper. Too many jars, too many packets, too many tins. All shouting abundance, luxury, waste. There would be no more money until every last thing on the shelf was eaten...this will teach you..." (p.113). Razia is able to live her life independently only after her husband's accidental death. The pattern of male authority gets repeated in case of Mrs. Islam as well; she is the brains behind her husband's successful business yet she never leads from the front as long as he is alive. It is only after his death that she becomes the primary authority of their business.

Women's Reduced Self-Worth

Nazneen's, Razia's and Mrs. Islam's low self-perception is shaped by patriarchal expectations and the systemic devaluation of women's worth, which profoundly impacts their self-esteem and identity. Self-perception refers to how individuals view themselves, encompassing self-esteem, self-worth, and self-image. According to Baumeister (1999), self-esteem is a person's overall sense of self-worth or personal value, which significantly influences their behavior and mental health. For women in patriarchal societies, self-perception is often negatively impacted by gender norms that devalue their contributions and capabilities.

Razia's self-perception is deeply influenced by the societal norms. She frequently diminishes the value of her own gender, as she tells Nazneen, "daughters they are trouble" (p.209); though it is her son who becomes a drug addict whereas her daughter holds a clear plan on how she would build her future. Nazneen maintains a similar perception about her gender and about herself as she remembers her mother's saying, "We are just women. What can we do?" (p. 93). This sentiment reflects the ingrained belief that women are inherently less capable and deserving of agency compared to men. Such internalized inferiority is a product of patriarchal conditioning, where women are socialized to accept subordinate roles and view themselves as inherently flawed.

Research on gender and self-perception highlights how societal expectations shape women's self-concept. Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian (2017) found that young girls often associate brilliance with men more than women, which affects their aspirations and self-esteem. In *Brick*

Lane, Nazneen limits her aspirations according to her husband's direction, as she tells her daughters, "When I was married, I wanted to go to college to learn English, but your father said there was no need... and he was right. I know enough" (p. 176). This resignation to her husband's ruling reflects her internalized belief that her desires and ambitions are less important and ultimately unattainable.

Nazneen's self-perception is also marked by a profound sense of guilt and self-blame. Her internal monologue is filled with self-deprecating thoughts, as illustrated in these lines, "She had taken to reminding herself, you're nothing, you're nothing" (p. 278). This mantra of self-deprecation signifies the extent to which Nazneen has absorbed patriarchal values, leading her to continuously question her worth and capabilities. Her internal struggle is further evidenced in her self-torture, as described in the text: "She examined the bite marks on her body and for each one she held herself accountable. This is where I savaged myself here and here and here" (p. 318). This self-punishment reflects her internalized oppression, where she blames herself for the neglect she endures, highlighting the psychological toll of living in a repressive environment.

Nazneen's silent rebellions against her husband also illustrate her low self-perception. When her husband refuses to help her sister, Nazneen engages in small acts of defiance, such as placing fiery red chilies in his sandwich (p. 56). However, these acts go unnoticed by her husband, reinforcing her sense of powerlessness and invisibility. Her subtle rebellions are a stark contrast to the overt control exerted by her husband, underscoring the imbalance of power in their relationship. She does not articulate her displeasure to her husband rather chooses silence and silent subtle actions to convey her annoyance; if she had strong self-esteem, she would have made sure to get her frustration be recognized by her husband.

Nazneen's suppression of personal desires and dreams further exemplifies her low self-perception. She chastises herself for dreaming about skating, as the text describes, "She could not see the audience, but she heard them and the man let go of her hand, but she was not afraid. She lowered her leg and skated on until Raqib woke and looked at her skeptically. Yes, she told him, your mother is a foolish woman" (p. 84). This suppression signifies her acceptance of a limited existence dictated by societal and familial expectations.

Mrs. Islam's self-perception is complex, reflecting both her capability and her internalized dependence on patriarchal structures. Despite successfully running her husband's business during his lifetime due to his incompetence, and even more so after his death, Mrs. Islam continues to lament her widowhood. Her statement, "I have been a widow many years...God knows how I've suffered without a husband all these years. Please listen to me, get close, God has tested me. A widow's life is no joke" (p. 268), highlights this paradox. While she demonstrates significant entrepreneurial skills and resilience, her self-perception remains tied to her husband's absence. This reflects a deep internalization of societal norms that dictate a woman's worth and identity through her marital status, illustrating the struggle between her evident independence and the ingrained belief in her need for male validation and support.

The Politics of Characters Appearance

In the novel, Nazneen's appearance is closely tied to her perceived lack of agency and her dreams of empowerment. The portrayal of her fantasies and the evaluation of her physical attributes by others reveal a deeper commentary on the trivialization of Bangladeshi women's traditional attire and the problematic notion that freedom lies in adopting Western clothing.

Nazneen's daydreams about Western clothing reflect a belief that changing her attire would transform her life and grant her the freedom she desires. She imagines that if she wore "a skirt and a jacket and a pair of high heels," she would "walk around the glass palaces on Bishop's Gate and talk into a slim phone and eat lunch out of a paper bag." Similarly, if she wore "trousers and underwear like the girl with the big camera," she envisions herself roaming the streets "fearless and proud." She even fantasizes about wearing "a tiny skirt with knickers to match and a tight bright top," which would allow her to "skate through life with a sparkling smile and a handsome man who took her hand" (p. 257). This association between clothing and agency suggests that Nazneen believes her traditional attire confines her and that adopting Western styles could magically grant her the freedom and opportunities she yearns for.

This notion is problematic as it trivializes the complex realities of Bangladeshi women by implying that their empowerment hinges merely on their choice of clothing. The idea that

traditional attire is inherently restrictive and that freedom lies in Western clothing is a simplistic and culturally insensitive perspective. It reduces the rich cultural significance of traditional dress to a symbol of oppression, ignoring the diverse ways in which women navigate their identities and agency within their cultural contexts.

Chanu, Nazneen's husband, reinforces this trivialization by evaluating her appearance in profit-loss terms. He describes her as "Not beautiful but not so ugly either," with a "broad" face and "big forehead," and eyes that are "a bit too close together" (p. 17). He also comments on her height and hips, concluding that he is "satisfied" with her appearance as it meets his criteria for bearing children. This objectification reduces Nazneen to her physical attributes, implicitly suggesting that her worth and capabilities are defined by her appearance.

Nazneen's private experimentation with a sequined top further explores this theme. As she adjusts her appearance to fit a more Western ideal, she experiences a fleeting sense of transformation and empowerment. She locks herself in the bathroom, dons the sequined vest, and adjusts her hair and breasts to achieve a desired look. For a moment, she feels a sense of liberation, imagining herself moving "without weight" and turning with a handsome man at her side (p. 201). However, this momentary illusion underscores a deeper issue—the reduction of women's empowerment to superficial changes in attire, overlooking the socio-cultural and economic factors that truly shape their agency.

Naila Kabeer argues that empowerment for women, particularly in South Asia, involves enhancing their capabilities and expanding their choices in a substantive way, rather than focusing on superficial aspects such as appearance (Kabeer, 1999). Empowerment is a multifaceted process that includes access to education, economic opportunities, and participation in decision-making, which are not contingent on adopting Western clothing.

Razia's appearance reflects her resilient personality and defiance against traditional gender norms, but this depiction also raises critical questions about the representation of femininity and cultural identity. Razia's unconventional look and mannerisms, while highlighting her strength, can be seen as reinforcing the problematic notion that women must adopt masculine traits to be perceived as strong.

When Razia cuts her hair short and wears it under a hat, she appears almost masculine: "There was nothing feminine about her face and with her hair tucked into her hat she could have been a laborer or a fisherman" (p. 64). This transformation emphasizes her rebellion against gender norms but also suggests that strength and defiance are inherently masculine traits, thereby trivializing the notion that women can be strong while maintaining a feminine appearance.

Sexual Exploitation of Bengali Women: Trust and Control

The dynamic of sexual politics is observable in the violent encounter between Mr. Chaowdhury, the landlord, and Hasina. The harrowing scene where Mr. Chaudhary rapes Hasina poignantly exemplifies the dynamics of patriarchal sexual politics, highlighting the power and control men exert over women through violence and intimidation. This act of rape is not merely an expression of physical dominance but a manifestation of the deep-seated patriarchal values that perpetuate male authority and female subjugation.

Kate Millett's seminal work, *Sexual Politics* (1970), provides a crucial framework for understanding this power dynamic. Millett argues that patriarchy fundamentally structures the power relations between men and women, particularly through sexual control and coercion. In the scene described, Mr. Chowdhury's violent intrusion into Hasina's space and his subsequent actions underscore the patriarchal entitlement he feels over her body and autonomy. His assertion, "let me see the whore," dehumanizes Hasina, reducing her to an object of his rage and sexual gratification. This language reflects the patriarchal ideology that views women as property to be controlled and punished for perceived transgressions.

Research on male power and rape, such as the work by Brownmiller (1975) in *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, further elucidates this dynamic. Brownmiller posits that rape is a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear. Mr. Chowdhury's actions embody this assertion, as he uses physical violence and threats to instill fear and assert his dominance over Hasina. His questioning of her loyalty and the benefits he has provided her highlights the transactional nature of their relationship, rooted in patriarchal expectations of female gratitude and submission.

Moreover, the psychological impact of this violence on Hasina is profound. Her internal monologue, filled with fear and self-blame, reflects the internalized misogyny that victims of sexual violence often experience. She writes, "I have bring shame on self," illustrating how patriarchal norms compel women to bear the burden of guilt and shame for the violence inflicted upon them.

Additionally, Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) exploration of hegemonic masculinity in *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept* provides insight into Mr. Chowdhury 's behavior. Hegemonic masculinity upholds the idea that male dominance and female subordination are natural and inevitable. Mr. Chowdhury 's assertion of control and his subsequent command for Hasina to rub his feet post-rape further exemplify the entitlement and authority that hegemonic masculinity grants men over women's bodies and actions.

The dynamic between Nazneen and her young lover Karim, which happens in London, is also noteworthy from sexual politics perspective. The relationship between Nazneen and Karim serves as a complex exploration of sexual politics, particularly within the framework of patriarchal structures. Kate Millett, in her seminal work *Sexual Politics* (1970), argues that sexual relations are inherently political, as they reflect and perpetuate power imbalances inherent in patriarchal societies. Millett posits that sexual behavior is one of the many areas where male dominance is asserted and female subordination is enforced. This perspective is evident in Nazneen's relationship with Karim, where her sexual awakening is inextricably linked to a struggle for power and autonomy.

Nazneen's initial attraction to Karim is depicted in a manner that highlights her internal conflict and societal conditioning. Nazneen observes Karim's physical and spiritual attributes, noting that he is "more God conscious than her own husband" (p.237) This comparison shows her internalized patriarchal values, where a man's religious piety and moral standing are equated with desirability and power.

Toril Moi, in her essay *Feminist, Female, Feminine* (1985), discusses the ways in which women's sexuality is constructed and controlled by patriarchal discourse. Moi argues that women's sexual desires and identities are often suppressed or manipulated to conform to societal

expectations. Nazneen's experiences with Karim reflect this suppression and the subsequent awakening of her own desires. Nazneen's reaction to Karim is visceral: "Nazneen felt an electric trunt run from her nipples to her big toes. She sat very still" (p.242). This physical response marks the beginning of her sexual awakening, which is both thrilling and terrifying, as it challenges the boundaries set by her patriarchal upbringing.

The power dynamics in Nazneen and Karim's relationship are further complicated by the physical and emotional interactions described in the text. The description of their physical encounter is laden with conflicting emotions: "She had a fever and her body was shaking...when he kissed the back of her neck she moaned again" (p.267). Here, the act of sex becomes a site of both pleasure and power struggle. Nazneen's physical response signifies a surrender to her desires, yet it also highlights her lack of agency, as Karim initiates and controls the encounter.

Millett's analysis of the politics of sexual relationships is evident in the way Nazneen's sexual experiences are framed as transgressive and fraught with guilt. The narrative delves into Nazneen's internal turmoil: "he was the first man to see her naked. It made her sick with shame. It made her sick with desire" (p.278). This duality of shame and desire encapsulates the patriarchal conditioning that views female sexuality as something to be controlled and hidden. The reference to their act as a "crime" with the "sentence [being] death" further underscores the societal condemnation and internalized guilt that Nazneen faces.

The sexual politics at play is also evident in the dynamics of control and submission, "he pushed her onto the bed and tore at her blouse and pushed the skirt of her sari around her waist till dressed she was more than naked" (p.321). This scene reveals the complexity of Nazneen's desires, where her submission is tinged with an undercurrent of rebellion and defiance. The act of biting his ear and lip, drawing blood, signifies a desperate attempt to assert some form of control within the confines of their illicit relationship.

Moi's argument about the patriarchal construction of female sexuality is further illustrated where Karim recites verses from the Quran to Nazneen (p.326). His narration about adultery being predestined by Allah places their actions within a moral and religious framework, attempting to justify or mitigate the guilt associated with their affair. Nazneen's response,

"Nazneen heard only the blood in her ears she watched Karim as a mouse watches a cat," underscores her vulnerability and the power imbalance inherent in their relationship (p.326). This metaphor of prey and predator encapsulates the fear and submission that defines Nazneen's experience.

The culmination of Nazneen's internal conflict and the power dynamics in her relationship with Karim is evident in textual lines, as the text writes, "She tightened the muscles of her pelvic floor afraid all of a sudden that she would wet herself" (p.384). This moment of physical and emotional control reflects the profound impact of patriarchal sexual politics on Nazneen's psyche. The fear of losing control over her body is directly linked to the societal pressures and expectations surrounding her sexuality and autonomy.

Conclusion

The detailed textual analysis of *Brick Lane* reveals that the novel trivializes working women as independent agents of their lives. Working women are relegated to conventionally expected jobs such as sewing, cleaning, or prostitution. None of the female characters occupy intellectually challenging workplaces or positions of authority.

Even Razia, who emerges as a leading figure in her business towards the end of the text, is only briefly depicted in this role, offering just a glimpse of her agency as a leader. The narrative omits women who, through commitment and determination, strive towards financial stability based on their own abilities without any male help. It completely omits women who are career focused because of their professional passion rather it depicts women falling in professional line by accident or due to their dire circumstances. The narrative condemns women who choose unconventional romantic partners, often framing their behaviors within conventional expectations. Women, in the novel, have an internalized belief on fate being the pre-decider of the course of their life, including their sufferings.

Working women in *Brick Lane* are portrayed as emotionally driven, preoccupied with romantic ideals, engaging in gossip, and undermining one another. When they prioritize their own needs over others, they burden themselves with guilt, shame, and self-loathing. The narrative omits representation of women who assert their independence and prioritize their own needs, thus reinforcing a limited and stereotypical view of women's roles and capacities.

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