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Homeland and Other Homes: A Parallel Study of the Portrayal of Female Diasporas in Monica Ali's Brick Lane and Adib Khan's Seasonal Adjustments

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Abstract**: The diaspora writers miss what they cannot experience back home and so they write; they write about the memories they can never make, the moments they can never relive, and the "home" they can never actually call home. Monica Ali and Adib Khan's representation of homeland in their respective novels Brick Lane and Seasonal Adjustments is rather predictable; the same age-old abused East which is a place to be nostalgic about but not a place to settle in. Where Ali's protagonist Nazneen struggles to create a "home" around her domestic world in London, she does find the freedom, never allowed to her back in Bangladesh. On the contrary, Khan's minor character Nadira in Seasonal Adjustments has a successful career and life in London, however, fails to call England her "permanent home". It is said that the females are "internal diasporas" in their own homes, however, they adjust more easily in their adopted land than the male ones as they experience freedom in their exile in the foreign land and can forge an identity of their own which is often denied back home. This paper endeavours to capture the experience of the female diasporas shared in these two novels and tries to understand different diaspora experiences regarding home and other homes, thus acknowledge the fact that all diasporas are not identical and they do not share identical experience regarding their homeland and adopted land.

Keywords: Female Diaspora, Home, Nostalgia, Freedom, Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Home is a physical location where one feels a sense of belonging and at the same time it is a mental space where one is drawn to return again and again. However, the definition of "home" is quite different for the diasporic beings. The term diaspora carries historical and cultural implications, frequently linked to the Jewish Diaspora—the dispersion of Jews outside of Israel—and related events. But the idea of diaspora may be extended to many

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circumstances when a group of people move and is not exclusive to any one group or culture. In this modern era, this displaced population of neo or new diasporas choose to change their geographic location for cultural, economic, political and social causes, but mainly for what Maswood Akhter has phrased, the "lure of the lucre". And this modern age diasporas have redefined this idea of "home" by living in the "overlapping, intertwined territories", that is dwelling both in the homeland and the adopted land. They migrate to their adopted lands for a better and safer future; however, they keep dwelling in the recollected memories of their homeland, trying to capture the "essence" of home. Maswood Akhter in his "Home and Diaspora in Literary Contexts: A Brief Discourse on Relevant Issues", has depicted this diasporic home narrative as a "hunt for self", especially for the female diasporas. It is often claimed that in the homeland, women's identity and agency remain quite marginalised. These women marry into diaspora families and recreate a home in the adopted land. Initially the unique experience of female diasporas is ignored in the diaspora studies. The Western world perceives them as oppressed beings who are dominated by the repressive Eastern patriarchal structure and the Eastern world affirms that their experience is a passive one that does not require to be heard. However, with time the female diasporas are recognised for their journey which offers them a space to explore "self" and conceive a new identity. Here this diasporic journey also gives them an opportunity to "assert independence and to redefine roles and perception of self". The adopted land brings forward opportunities which help them to forge an identity flourished by self-knowledge. Diaspora literature often deals with the themes of displacement, loneliness, social estrangement, dilemmas of cultural identity and desire. However, the experiences of double marginalization, patriarchal rule, ideological pressures, gender inequality, gender domination, power relations, sexism, stereotyping, liberation, and sexuality are highlighted by female diaspora authors. With that, female diaspora narratives are also marked by introspective tales of self-discovery and unique experiences, where the female diasporas learn about themselves and their value. Monica Ali, the British-Bangladeshi, first-generation diasporic writer, in her ground-breaking debut novel Brick Lane tells the story of Nazneen, a young girl of eighteen who moves to London from her village in Mymensingh, Bangladesh after she gets married to the "frog-faced" Chanu. Ali's Nazneen turns into this young, independent woman who decides to stay back in London despite her husband's return to the homeland by forging an identity of her own. On the other hand, The Australia-based Bangladeshi origin novelist, Adib Khan's protagonist Iqbal, in Seasonal Adjustments meets Nadira who has returned from England as "England could never be her permanent home". Since the concept of "home" is well connected with the concept of identity, her identity crisis in a racist Western world makes her deny the comfort of the adopted land and come back to the homeland. In most of the diaspora narrative, diasporas are subjected to "dismissive generalization" especially female ones, but Rosemary Marangoly George claims that all diasporas are not identical and they do not share identical histories nor they will follow the same trajectory into the future and as such deserve individual attention. So, the parallel journeys of Nazneen and Nadira both are individual journeys towards searching and examining their self and identity and relocation of "home" and these tales are needed to be heard.

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2. RELATED WORKS

A number of write ups has been studied and analysed to develop this article and these writings have inspired and enriched this piece of writing. Though this article mainly focuses on the experience and narrative of Bangladeshi diaspora writers' female characters, one has to acknowledge the distinct lived experience and narratives of diasporas and the relationship they have with their motherland and adopted land for better understanding. To comprehend the diaspora home narrative and the "diasporic anxiety" around it better one may look into Maswood Akhter's "Home and Diaspora in Literary Contexts: A Brief Discourse on Relevant Issues". This piece of writing is an "engaged" analysis of these issues and it enhances our understanding of different diasporic life and acquaintance. Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora, edited by Sandhya Rao Mehta, examines the various ways that gender is written about, acted, explored, expressed, and understood in Indian diaspora literature. It combines several methods for negotiating identities and forming new identities in the adopted land that helps to contemplate on the experience of the diasporas. In the mentioned book, there is a chapter called "Gendered Diasporic Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake and Monica Ali's Brick Lane" by Elizabeth Jackson which can be useful to understand Ali's narrative of home and identity. Sanjukta Dasgupta has written "Locating 'Home' in a Liminal Space: Longing and Belonging in the Fiction of 'Bengali' Women Writer" to look deeper into the matter of 'home' and 'other homes' and where the character belongs. Sanchita Islam's article on London Fictions, "Monica Ali: Brick Lane"- 2003" discusses the growth of the protagonist Nazneen from a juvenile, village girl to a liberated woman. "Constitution of Identity of Diasporic Figures in Monica Ali's Brick Lane", a paper by Suhail Ahmed talks about the approaches through which the character Nazneen maintains her connection with "home" while forming a new one in the adopted land. Gokcen Kara's "Migration and Alienation Phenomenon in Monica Ali's Brick Lane from Postcolonial Perspective and Its Effects on Men and Women" examines how differently men and women perceive migration and the state of diaspora. Though discussion about Adib Khan's minor character Nadira cannot be found, a detailed write up by Maswood Akhter, "Bangladesh Revisited: A Monograph on Adib Khan's Fiction" gives us ideas about Khan's diasporic characters and this monograph sheds light on the different ways diasporas perceive their homeland and adopted land. Akhter's "Portrayal of a Dystopic Dhaka: On Diasporic Reproductions of Bangladeshi Urbanity" is about Monica Ali's Brick Lane and Adib Khan's Seasonal Adjustments and Spiral Road and it analyses Khan and Ali's artistic and at the same time political representation of Bangladesh, their "homeland", from the point of view of diaspora characters.

3. METHODOLOGY

To develop this paper, close textual exegesis is used carefully to create a bridge between these two novels. It entails analysing and contrasting the two suggested texts to have a better understanding of the relations female diasporas form with their motherland and adopted land. With the help of diaspora discourse, this paper will look deep into the diverse diaspora experience to contemplate the perspectives of different diaspora writers and their portrayal of

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their diaspora characters. In order to better comprehend the associated concerns involving diaspora home narratives and identity notions, this write-up will analyse other papers that are comparable to it in order to pinpoint the key traits, parallels, and differences between these two books.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nazneen was supposed to be dead when she was born, but it is fate that decides that she would live. And it is fate that brings this young, village girl to London to give her a new life, a life to live with some meanings and a new identity. Ali's Brick Lane is not about the place Brick Lane, rather it is about a young girl from a Bangladeshi village who endeavours to make it her home with years of struggle through gradually earning her freedom. When she is born, Banesa, the mid-wife tells her mother that "fate will decide everything in the end, whatever route you follow" (Ali, 9) and her whole life Nazneen surrenders to her fate to choose her route. That's how she ends up in London, so far away from her "home", but it is when she challenges her fate and chooses her own path, she finds true freedom and creates a home of her own. In the first few years Nazneen struggles in her London flat which is stuffed with furniture and Sanchita Islam in her writing, "Monica Ali: Brick Lane"- 2003", characterised it as "claustrophobic, static existence". The journey of a diaspora is a "journey of displacement", living in an "unaccustomed earth" where the ground beneath them feels estranged and unwelcoming. So, she escapes this unexplored reality through dreaming about being in Bangladesh where there is light, space, limitless nature, where she can roam around freely. She creates this "imaginary homeland" and takes shelter there. And this idea of "home" is recreated "through the lens of nostalgia". Nazneen struggles as she is sickened by her existence in this new country which seems hostile to her added by the loss of her first-born son. Her escape to the memory of a romanticised childhood homeland provides a barrier in her acceptance of a new place. Her husband Chanu is a kind man, "generous, without a hint of cruelty" (Ali, 30), but their estranged marriage adds up to her alienation. Chanu does not want her to go out much and when she wants to learn English, he never really encourages her. Through TV and with the help of her daughters, Nazneen's English becomes feasible and she even starts working from home. Her sewing job provides some extra money that Chanu has failed to provide. With time, the more disillusioned Chanu becomes in London, the more at "home" she feels in here. Nazneen comes from a world which is patriarchal but in London she finds a way to become the head of the family. It is said that the new "home" often gives the female diasporas a space for self-exploration. Karim, a young British-Bengali helps her to earn a "place in the world". Through Karim, Nazneen starts to explore the world beyond her flat in Brick Lane. She is obsessed with 'ice-skating' and Chanu never appears to be her partner in her imagination. However, Karim seems like someone who will be her partner and who will skate her through a life of freedom. This extra-marital affair and her sexual liberation seem to give some agency to her to earn her individuality and freedom and to stand up for her own needs and desires. Where Chanu returns home dejected, abandoning his opportunity in London for the memories of "home" in his head, Nazneen breaks free from her unhappy marriage by embracing the freedom she discovers and makes a "home" out of her estranged life in London.

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Khan's Seasonal Adjustments profoundly discusses the displaced life of the diasporas and their journeys. Iqbal, a man in his forties, feels the urge to visit his motherland from Australia after being exhausted in a failed marriage. The diaspora protagonist struggles to reconnect with his identity back home and his claim of Australia being his new home is also dubious comprehending his dilemma of belonging. He meets Nadira at a party back home where they share their personal notes regarding their migrant life and his perspective about this life of alienation and rootlessness is challenged. Nadira has lived overseas for nearly sixteen years, had a successful career as a doctor and even married a Welsh surgeon. However, after divorcing her husband, she returns "home" as she cannot find any justification for living in a foreign country only for its future benefits. Coming back has felt like a "second migration" to her but she claims that she is not good at 'sustaining her illusions or hope' as she would rather live with the "despair of reality" (Khan, 152). She returns to be "a part of an ethnic majority" again which restores her dignity. She is well aware of the disadvantages of life back home but she is not entirely sceptical about it too. Coming back to her roots becomes something to be celebrated since it boosts her self-confidence as an individual person. The journey of the diasporas is a journey towards a new self and at the same time this is a journey of displacement of that self. And these journeys and displacements disrupt self's stability and only the feeling of belonging can make one feel at home again. Nadira's "second migration" to her homeland welcomes her with the "comfort of belonging" as there is "nothing artificial about it" (Khan, 153). It feels like returning to the root, leaving the alien world behind that confronts one with the sheer despair of exclusion, disassociation and estrangement. Now as she is back "home" she does not have to think about 'abuses or snide remarks about her colour or her dress, no fear of racist attacks, no blame for Britain's difficulties' (Khan, 153) and she can prove her individuality and claim her independent life here by claiming the "self" that has been restored.

5. CONCLUSION

In the Western world, the female diasporas from the third world are projected as oppressed and dominated beings and therefore, in diaspora narrative most of the time it is stated that only through "modernising" and "liberating" women from their home culture, their search for self and freedom can be attained. Women are 'the docile victims' who are needed to be saved and through their displacement in the Western world they get the opportunity to go beyond their stereotypical fixed roles. Thus, in Brick Lane, Nazneen, obtains her freedom from her oppressed, patriarchal culture only when she accepts her life in the Western world and breaks free from her Bangladeshi upbringing. Initially her idea of homeland is romanticised by nostalgia and past memories, "a series of mental images", tinted with imagination; however, she gets the real idea of "home" back in Bangladesh from the letters of her younger sister, Hasina. Hasina writes that home is "another hartal", "religious protest" and a place where there is "no end of corruption" (Ali, 121). She also talks about the women she works with. Most of them has no husband, the ones who have one get beating every day. These letters from her sister, help Nazneen to not romanticize about "home" back in Bangladesh anymore. "Home" always needs "more stability", however, Bangladesh does not seem like one that can offer much. London, the home she has decorated here, seems more like a real, stable place to

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her when she breaks out of her mould of a dutiful, submissive wife and becomes an independent woman here. From an invisible woman she becomes someone who has recreated a "home" of her own by finding her voice and a strong position in it. Many critics claim that diaspora narratives portray the West as a better place to live specially for women by ignoring the institutionalized racism, sexism, heterosexism, socioeconomic marginalization, and a sense of estrangement, diasporas usually experience in their host country. The West is projected as a safe space for women diasporas for empowering them, where male diasporas often suffer from "Going Home Syndrome" (Ali, 24). Thus, Nazneen's husband, Chanu returns home escaping "the defeated present" with his disillusioned heart but Nazneen keeps dreaming and thriving. However, Nadira's story is a different one. Ali celebrates the freedom Nazneen achieves in her adopted land where Khan depicts another side of the coin, where Nadira sees through her life in the adopted land and chooses her homeland which brings her the comfort of belonging. The concept of identity and the sense of "home" are fundamentally intertwined, making it a bewildering experience for diasporas. "Home" is a psychological and emotional space for them that enhances their feeling of self and belonging. However, for the women, "home" is not always a safe haven. The reason lies behind their being victims in their own homes. But these two women do not play victim, both of them have faced double marginalization, and they do not let their journeys be defined based on their suffering and estrangement in the host land. Rather they have created their own identity based on these experiences. Back home Nazneen is just this little girl whose father wants to marry her off so that she cannot bring shame in the family like her younger sister, Hasina. However, in London, Nazneen becomes this independent woman who can even chase her dream of ice-skating as her friend, Razia claims, "This is England, you can do whatever you like" (Ali, 413). On the contrary, Nadira recreates "home" in her homeland where she can live with her dignity being a comfortable insider in the community by disregarding the stereotypical, homogenised ideologies imposed on her by the host land. One needs to be brave enough to relocate, to find home in the one that has been left behind once. Nazneen's decision to stay where she feels like home and where she has made an identity of her own is a well-known narrative in diaspora literature. However, Nadira shows her strength by settling on the decision of coming back "home", and that too needs to be applauded. To be more sellable in the Western market, the unique experience of each diaspora female experience is ignored. Mostly it is portrayed that women break free from their traditional roles and status in the families and become independent individuals in their adopted land by accepting a new identity. The stereotypical representation of female diasporas ensures that the East and its customs and culture are seen as dangerous and unwelcoming to women. Thus, this paper has endeavoured to shed light on different perspectives on homeland and adopted land from the female diaspora point of view.

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