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**Multiculturalism and Britishness from women's perspective in Monica
Ali's *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith's *Swing Time***

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Introduction

Postcolonial literature is said to have developed around the 1980s to the present time. As its name suggests, postcolonial literature questions the effects of colonialism and the power of a colonial empire on a country and its people, regarding the past and its effects on the present time. Indeed, colonialism suggests imposing the colonizer's social practices and culture onto a population while gaining wealth through their exploitation (Quayson n.p). Europe, and more specifically Britain, have been the biggest colonizers in history. Postcolonial authors come from countries that have once been colonized and address the consequences of decolonization over time. This literary critique gives a voice to minorities through the use of fiction and covers a wide variety of themes including the theme of identity, otherness, race, gender, motherhood, and diaspora while challenging dominant perspectives that have been imposed by colonial powers. We will be studying diasporic literature which refers to the expression of the immigrant experience in a place of alterity in which two cultures meet in novels. It is a constant negotiation of one's identity because of which the individual finds himself in a position of "in-betweenness" when simultaneously experiencing two cultures and is torn between asserting their difference and assimilating the dominant culture. It is a literature of constant movement and transgressive crossing which interrogates the notion of belonging in a multicultural environment (Duboin 5-6). In this paper, I will be focusing on two contemporary novels which, through their narrative, highlight the issue of the construction of identity and the need for their protagonists to emancipate as both an immigrant and a woman in the western multicultural city of London, in Great Britain.

Swing Time is a novel written by Zadie Smith in 2016 that explores the themes of identity, race, class and, gender in the multicultural city of London. The story starts in 1982, in the district of Willesden when the two female protagonists are seven years old. It is a first-

person narrative, sharing the nameless protagonist's point of view which alternates between moments of her teenagehood and her early young adult life. It tells the story of two mixed white and Jamaican girls: the unnamed narrator and her childhood friend Tracey who both experience identity crises but in a rather different way. They both meet in a dance class and become best friends, sharing their passion and their dream of becoming professional dancers. As they gradually become young adults throughout the narration, their paths separate and Tracey gets accepted into a prestigious dance school while the narrator works for a pop sensation, Aimee, and travels to West Africa to help its inhabitants, living in extreme poverty. During her trip, she is exposed to the inequalities and hardships of people in the continent and realizes the horrible conditions they are facing, outside of the West. This traveling experience could be linked to Rosi Braidotti's feminist theory of nomadism which overcomes the essentialism and determinism of Western's dominant concepts of identity and therefore provides an opportunity to emancipate (Kürpick). This novel deeply explores the theme of identity, both of the protagonists are influenced daily by their environment and entourage. The nameless narrator struggles with her own identity because she feels disconnected from her Jamaican heritage and is torn between adapting to her country and keeping Jamaican cultural habits; she feels like an outsider in both countries and embodies the struggle of the mixed child along with her friend Tracey. It will be significant to explain this phenomenon and its consequences with both theories on the experience of "segmented assimilation" as originally proposed by Portes and Zhou (Song) and the constant cultural negotiation the two friends are exposed to.

Brick Lane is a novel written by Monica Ali and published in 2003. The novel takes place in the district of Tower Hamlets in which a large majority of its inhabitants are part of the Bengali community, and tells the story of the protagonist Nazneen, a young Bengali woman who moves from Bangladesh to London to live with Chanu, a Bengali man she had an arranged marriage with. The story is told using an omniscient third-person narrator which shares many

perspectives but mainly focuses on Nazneen's experience. The novel starts in 1967 before she moves to Britain. When she finally lives in the London district of Tower Hamlet, she is completely dependent on her well-educated husband because she is illiterate and is not familiar with her host country. At first, she feels safe and is happily fulfilling her duty as a mother and a wife. She quickly feels isolated, confined in her apartment building where her only interactions are with people of the Bengali community who represent the vast majority of the district's population. The main themes explored in the novel are similar to the first novel: there is a clear struggle to find a sense of belonging as an immigrant from another country. In addition, there are the themes of class and gender empowerment while facing prejudice and racism in the multicultural and diverse city of London. As the story unfolds, Nazneen meets Karim and gets a taste of the outside world, stimulating her interest in emancipation as both a woman and an immigrant while also struggling to find a middle ground between her Bengali culture and Western practices. In this case, we will discuss Nazneen's emancipation through the unveiling of the immigrant woman and the theory of subaltern cosmopolitanism, as explained by Balachandran, which is a way of living which allows room to the "Other" to remain open to a diversity of culture (Balachandran).

Both novels' protagonists have been exposed to different cultures and find themselves immersed in the multicultural city of London despite their social and cultural backgrounds being different. Indeed, the novel *Brick Lane* starts in Mymensingh district, East Pakistan in 1967 with the protagonist Nazneen's birth. The story resumes with her moving to Britain to unite with Chanu in an arranged marriage, a union that suggests being offered an opportunity to have a better life. The novel then shares the life of the protagonist as the mother of two daughters while being physically and psychologically confined in her apartment, perpetuating her duty of taking care of her household. In *Swing Time*, the story takes place in Willesden a place inhabited by a majority of Jamaicans. The story is told in the first person narrative, sharing

the thoughts of the nameless protagonist who lives in the shadow of others. In contradiction to *Brick Lane*, the nameless protagonist and her friend Tracey are both mixed children who experience both white British and Jamaican cultures through their parents. What is significant to point out is that the novels' protagonists come from two different social and cultural backgrounds, and are offered different opportunities and experiences. They all share several point of view and ways of emancipating in their quest to create their identity. Furthermore, it is significant to add that the female protagonists are highly influenced by their social and geographical environment which become elements triggering their identity crisis.

To discuss and study these two novels, I focused on several aspects to understand how all these elements have contributed to the construction of their identities despite the hardships they represent for all protagonists. Firstly, Britain's sociopolitical context and the characters' countries of origin have been my first concern. The evolution of Great Britain from a racist colonial Empire with restricted politics regarding immigrants to a multicultural country home for immigrants from all around the world was essential in understanding the context these postcolonial novels are referring to. The protagonists' and their families' motivations for moving out of their countries of origin, in the quest for a better social and political home, with safer living conditions and better opportunities, are undeniable aspects to take into account to understand the motives of their actions and state of mind. However, the integration into their new home is often limited due to cultural self-restrictions such as arranged marriages and the duty of women to be bearers of their culture as shown by *Brick Lane*'s protagonist Nazneen who is obligated to live in the shadow of both her bengali community and her husband's. However, in both novels, cultural habits, stereotypes, and mobilities are used to transcend cultural barriers with the protagonists' passion in *Swing Time*: dancing which is a significant aspect of Jamaican culture. To some extent, through the interviews of both Monica Ali and Zadie Smith, we learn to what extent they relate to their fictional characters since they are both

mixed and come from immigrant families. It is interesting to find that they emphasize on the fact that the issues of migration and people's responses are different according to the generation of immigrants they are a part of.

The process of the creation of identities in multicultural London is explored in several ways through this paper with Rosi Braidotti's feminist theory of nomadism, the notion of space and living environments with the fragmented and melting-pot city of London in which several communities and races live. The marginalization of immigrants can be explained through the division of the city into small districts in which certain communities are concentrated and therefore, remain oblivious to other cultures. It is also sometimes a matter of the immigrants' desire to live isolated from the outside world by purposely not interacting with others in fear of losing a part of their identities. Moreover, another important aspect is the duality between assimilation and communitarianism which are discussed and linked to the encounter of the "Other". There is a paradox with the separation of cultures within a multicultural and heterogenous city which represents both a threat and an opportunity to the protagonists' development. Homi K. Bhabha's notion of hybridity will also be mentioned concerning the hardships mixed children face when growing up torn between two cultures as shown in the novel *Swing Time*. Despite *Brick Lane*'s protagonist Nazneen not being mixed, she experiences a kind of cultural hybridity when moving from Bangladesh to Britain but much later finds herself adapting to her host country's way of living through her encounter with the Other. Both experiences of hybridity raise the question of whether it is possible to find a balance between two cultures for the protagonists.

All these elements make us wonder how literature can be an effective tool to share a cultural experience in a multicultural country through the eyes of women coming from different backgrounds but whose paths symbolically cross through their emancipation. Indeed, we can

ask ourselves: how do the female protagonists of the novels *Brick Lane* and *Swing Time* manage to create their own identity and emancipate in a multicultural British context?

Firstly, we are going to discuss the heroines and their geographic location by emphasizing the reason behind their living in Britain and how their integration is closely related to the space they live in. Indeed, there are several reasons why one immigrates to another country such as the social and political context of the country of origin or the bad living conditions. This sudden change as well as the division of the city of London into different districts can also contribute to the isolation of minorities despite living in a multicultural and heterogenous city. We will also demonstrate that some immigrants wish to preserve their cultural identity at the expense of their integration by mentioning the notable difference between assimilation and integration in both novels.

Secondly, we are going to dedicate a part of our study to the female protagonists and their cultures by explaining that immigrant women play an essential role in preserving their culture and are obligated by their communities to bear the role of being their cultural representative abroad. Moreover, the integration of women immigrants is made difficult and partial because of the limited opportunities they have access to, and therefore multiculturalism can be seen as both a success and a failure when taking into account the historical and political evolution of the country.

Finally, we are going to demonstrate that in both novels, there is a paradox in the use of stereotypes which represent both a burden and an opportunity to emancipate for immigrant women. Indeed, the use of stereotypes is essential for understanding the constraints some cultural and social aspects can sometimes represent for the protagonists. However, the female protagonists end up emancipating from aspects of their cultures that make them invisible to society, leading to the unveiling of the immigrant woman. Therefore, there is a quest for identity about the protagonists' place as women in a patriarchal society and their struggle to find a

balance between the two cultures because of the fear of erasing their culture of origin in their quest for integration.

1. The heroines and their geographic location

In this part, I focus on the reasons why both the Jamaican and Bangladeshi communities migrated to Great Britain and that it is an important factor in their overall integration into the British community. The reasons include their geographic origin and the socio-cultural context in which their home country is in as well as the opportunity it represented for them as individuals and collective which leads them to a new living space in which they are faced with the issue of integration.

1.1. Their geographic origin

Both Jamaica and Bangladesh have been historically linked to Britain because they were British colonies in the past, respectively gaining their independence in 1962 and in 1971 for Bangladesh along with British India and later East Pakistan. There is an important colonial legacy to take into account for both ex-colonies. Indeed, the context of World Wars led British colonies to be repatriated because of the increased need for maritime labour as well as the need to reconstruct after the war (Balachandran 530). In 1968, there was an estimated number of one million Commonwealth immigrant residents in Britain with half this number being West Indian and sixty percent of this same number being migrants coming from Jamaica. This mass migration later changed the “face of the British society” which had been mostly white (Arslanova 1). The need for labour in Britain represented economic pressure and was a way to

escape overpopulated countries where opportunities in terms of employment were limited (Newall 25).

In her interview with the newspaper “The Guardian”, Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*’s author also adds another motive for migration to another country. For instance, one could seek refuge in another country because of civil war and political violence. She shares her childhood story about the “murderous nights” she was escaping from as a child along with her family in Tejgoan, Bangladesh, and explains that a mango tree helped them flee from the “the Shermans, Pattons, and Chafees of the Pakistan army” and their tanks which caused mass murders present in the time of political unrest in the country and caused her family to migrate to Great Britain (Ali n.p). However, we have to keep in mind that *Brick Lane* is not an autobiographical novel, and the true reason behind Nazneen’s arrival is not to escape political issues but to marry a Bangladeshi man living in London who has a better economic situation. The social condition was much more attractive in Britain but there was a notable gap between the expectations of the immigrants and the reality of life in Britain for the first generation of immigrants which can explain their increased skepticism in today’s society. Indeed, the nameless narrator’s grandmother migrated to Britain with her many children with the hope to give them more opportunities and worked hard as a cleaner to make ends meet and her struggle is emphasized at the beginning of the novel which sets a significant social and historical background essential for understanding women characters’ mindsets (Arslanova 47). Rejection in housing, employment, education, and overpopulation in urban areas were factors that made immigration unfavourable and ultimately led to a feeling of rejection for the immigrants who saw Britain as an opportunity to leave the poor conditions of their homeland (Newall 25).

A tax based on skin color, called the “color tax” was adopted for immigrants looking for a house (McGraw 372) and therefore emphasized the growing anxiety about racial mixing, political subversion, and resentment felt by the white British population which felt threatened

by this mass migration, especially during the Second World War (Balachandran 542). Indeed, the National Sailors and Firemen's Union (NSFU) demanded "the elimination and immediate repatriation [...] of Asiatic labour" who demanded a home after helping Great Britain recover from the consequences of the war (Balachandran 534). The male middle-class anxiety about gender, racial and imperial hierarchies resulted in the head constable of Liverpool blaming the rise in riots on the "arrogant and overbearing conduct" towards white men of both the "the negro population" and the white women who cohabited with them and got involved in more affective relationships with them (Balachandran 535). This situation of tension and rising racist measures caused an identity and self-determination crisis for immigrants. The growing need for more inclusive citizenship resulted, by the middle of the twentieth century, in a more multiculturally inclusive country with the passing of laws like the Race Relation Act in 1965 amended to prohibit racial discrimination in public places and introduced limited discrimination against employment as well as the passing of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962 (Newall 25).

The first-generation immigrants were preoccupied with their individual and familial survival as well as for the future generations, which would be offered better opportunities, and therefore led political battles to prove their place in the society while "battling with the idea of self-fulfillment, free from the burden of their immigrant past" (Arslanova 4). In the 1980s, there is a notable growing power of Muslim institutions and Islamic organisations with the arrival of the immigrants' wives which meant a greater emphasis on the norms and values of Muslim family life for Bangladeshi (Samad and Eade 20). By the end of the twentieth century, Great Britain was a multicultural country marked by the outcome of its colonial past with the presence of different ethnicities that mostly came from ex-colonial territories. Despite the measures taken in favour of immigration and against discrimination, the integration of ethnic minorities in the 1980s, integration and acceptance remained complicated for the second and later the third

generation of immigrants who still did not fit in and experienced prejudice based on “otherness” even though most of them were born in Britain and could no longer be called “immigrants” (Arslanova 61).

The characters’ geographic origins are significant points to remember when working on postcolonial and diasporic literature like *Brick Lane* and *Swing Time* to understand the implication and the authors’ intentions behind the stories they tell. The historical background and the old racist policies of England towards immigrants who helped the country recover from war and the daily discrimination they faced have an impact on the rise of identity issues among ethnic minorities in the country. But the first generation’s moving to Britain resulted in new multicultural living spaces in the city of London for the next generations but the city’s division into districts can contribute to the isolation of ethnic minorities.

1.2. Their living space

The city of London is divided into several districts which could be thought to promote the city’s cultural diversity, however as the term employed suggests, it might also be a significant factor of division and isolation. Each district is inhabited by numerous individuals and their respective cultures but it is important to note that in some areas, some communities are more present than in others. For instance, in the novel *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali shares the story of Tower Hamlet’s Brick Lane neighborhood through the daily life of Nazneen, her family, and her Bengali community. This district is situated at the heart of London and is the “heartland of the Bangladeshi community” despite being home to “Huguenot refugees, East European Jews, immigrants from Malta, Cyprus, the Caribbean, and Somalia for over two hundred years”

(Alexander 208). However, it is safe to say that the Bengali community is bar far the largest current population in the area. Despite being situated next to the financial center of London, the district is notorious for being a segregated space for the British capital's unprivileged population.

This segregation also means that this area is increasingly considered perceived as a tourist attraction and therefore associated with its myths of backwardness and stereotypes about social nonconformity, and delinquency by the white British population. Indeed, to emphasize the exoticism of the district, BBC Journal of 31 July 2006 described the district as follows: "When you turn the corner into Brick Lane in London's Shoreditch, the whiff of aromatic spices and strains of Bengali pop music are unmistakable. A busy, vibrant street, this heady mix of East London and the Indian subcontinent was also the scene of noisy and protest of Sunday." Indeed, Tower Hamlets provides a cultural experience to its visitors which results in a rise of exoticist consumerism. However, the district's homes are said to be poorly maintained and are often associated with deprivation. There is a notable struggle to keep up with the boom in capitalist culture (Hiddleston 58). Indeed, according to the Index of Local Deprivation, Tower Hamlets is the most deprived district out of the three hundred fifty-five London districts and the unemployment rates remain very high (Samad and Eade 22). Lefebvre, in 1991, explained that Brick Lane can be read as a site in which demotic and dominant meanings of community, history, ethnicity, and culture are played out (Alexander 203).

This separation from the wealthy financial neighbor of Tower Hamlets is presented by *Brick Lane*'s protagonist Nazneen whose story we follow from her moving to a multicultural London from her home country, Bangladesh to marry a Bangladeshi man named Chanu. An interesting aspect that we are soon shown is the repetitiveness of Nazneen's daily life as a Bengali woman who is physically and spiritually confined in her home. Indeed, all through the novel, Monica Ali barely shares any description or movement of the female protagonist outside

of her house and of the district she lives in. This confinement and separation from the rest of the world consciously contribute to her lack of integration with the rest of London. Indeed, her interactions are exclusively with people from her community and most specifically with women who might share a similar lifestyle as hers. At first, this confinement is seen as a place of comfort and security for Nazneen who seems to be satisfied with her lifestyle. However, through this narrative, readers soon understand that this view is perpetuated by her community and its practices and of her duty as a woman: since she has never experienced or even got a glimpse of the outside world, it appears as a scary and dangerous environment for her. Nazneen's closeted existence and its representation through the narrative and the stylistic choices of the author raises a question of our deluded desire for unmediated knowledge (Hiddleston 64). There is an examination of Nazneen's life in detail which allows the reader to cross the boundaries between the public and the private domain while providing knowledge of customs in the enclosed "ghettos", as perceived by the dominant narrative:

There were three rugs: red and orange, green and purple, brown and blue. The carpet was yellow with a green leaf design. One hundred per cent nylon and, Chanu said, very hard-wearing. The sofa and chairs were the colour of dried cow dung, which was a practical colour. They had little sheaths of plastic on the headrests to protect them from Chanu's hair oil. There was a lot of furniture, more than Nazneen had seen in one room before. Even if you took all the furniture in the compound, from every auntie and uncle's ghar, it would not match up to this one room. There was a low table with a glass centre and orange plastic legs, three little wooden tables that stacked together, the big table they used for the evening meal, a bookcase, a corner cupboard, a rack for newspapers, a trolley filled with files and folders, the sofa and armchairs, two footstools, six dining chairs and a showcase. The walls were papered in yellow with brown squares and circles lining neatly up and down. (15)

This enumeration of the lexical field of the house might seem irrelevant but its presence shows a greedy quest for knowledge of the reader who might be unfamiliar with this kind of lifestyle. We have shared an intimate view of Nazneen's intimacy and world represented by the home which is something we often do not get to see outside of narration. The constant presence of Nazneen's confined lifestyle in the narrative reminds this tendency of self-containment and social segregation of ethnic communities that are often discussed in cultural studies. Indeed, this safety felt in their community can be seen through the people's need to frequent the same clubs and social gatherings while purchasing their own food and enjoying their own food which represents a "tangible comfort and an intangible link with the past" and their culture of origin which is said to be essential for Jamaicans as well (Newall 29).

Even though it is safe to say that in Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time*, the nameless narrator is offered more opportunities, especially in terms of travel in her young adult life in the early 2000s, her childhood in the 1980s and her experience in Willesden is significant to point out in terms of isolation. As portrayed in Zadie Smith's previous novel, *White Teeth*, Willesden is well known for its difficult social situation and racism. In *Swing Time*, the author tries to explore different narrative techniques through a more experimental piece of writing, to catch the essence of an urban multicultural London (Arslanova 44). In this specific area of London, the community is exposed to a complex interconnection of cultural difference, sameness, and inequality which is both an opportunity for diversity but is also a symbol of marginalization (Scafe 98-9). The nameless narrator, despite sharing Jamaican and white British roots with her friend Tracey, their situation is very different. When they are children, they go to different schools and therefore experience their childhood as mixed children differently. Tracey goes to a single-sex school where "almost all of the girls were Indian or Pakistani, and wild [...] A rough school with a lot of fighting." (34) meanwhile the nameless narrator's school is situated in the middle-class area of Willesden in which "half black, a quarter white, a quarter South

Asian. Of the black half at least a third were ‘half-caste’, a minority within a nation, though the truth is it annoyed me to notice them” (34). Here, the author introduces us to an internal issue of identity that the nameless narrator goes through by using the word “half-caste”. Indeed, the narrator goes to a school in which races coexist and despite being half-black herself, she uses a derogatory word to talk about those who are like her but may have a different status, like her friend Tracey. This issue is further implied through the novel when the nameless narrator expresses her confusion in terms of belonging.

Unlike Nazneen, she gets to travel thanks to her job as one of Aimee’s assistants, a very famous pop star who often travels around the world with places like England, West Africa, and the United States. It is significant to note that the nameless narrator and her friend Tracey, both embody hybridity of culture since they are mixed women and all of these factors added up lead to an identity crisis. Therefore, the nameless protagonist never feels at home and rejects both belonging to white and black culture that can, to some extent, be explained by her lifestyle of nomadism. At the end of the novel, after having experienced somewhat a “white” woman’s lifestyle through Aimee, she goes back to Willesden, as a way to stay in touch with a part of her old self. In both novels, space is part of a broader system of social representation and structures which can be symbolic spaces of resistance and contest dominant forms of representation and attempt to control, also named “counter-space” by Lefebvre (Alexander 203). The two female protagonists, build their identity in harmony with the environment they are exposed to and in which they have to adapt and come to terms with their ethnic, racial, and religious difference because when they are no longer in touch with their roots, they are exposed to a feeling of disappearance (Arslanova 4).

Their living space and the division of London into districts and the experience, or not, of movement, contribute greatly to the characters' physical and spiritual isolation. There is a notable issue of immigration and integration because of the characters' wish to preserve a cultural aspect of their identity at the expense of their full integration in England.

1.3. Immigration and integration

The notion of immigration and integration are not necessarily related, in the sense that immigration does not equal being able to fully integrate into a country. Indeed, many factors play a role in the integration of an immigrant in his or her home country and we can get a glimpse of this issue through the characters of *Brick Lane* and *Swing Time* which both apprehend the issue in their own ways. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen is unable to integrate into the British culture because of the notion of “non-consumption” perpetuated by her role as a Bengali woman and a carer for her home and family. In a study conducted by Lindridge Andrew and Dhillon Kamaldeep using Indian Punjabi Sikh men living in Britain, we find that culturally marginalized groups are unable to engage with and negotiate through daily interactions and product consumption between the Asian and White cultures (Lindridge and Dhillon). This marginality could be explained by a “deliberate, self-destructive, nonengagement with culturally laden consumer objects” and therefore results in social, political, and economic exclusion while experiencing more discrimination compared to the rest of the society (Lindridge and Dhillon 408). In addition, product consumption is said to be an indication of a level of assimilation and dissociation with both the dominant culture and one's own ethnic culture and ultimately facilitates the acculturation process. Bhatia explains that acculturation is a process of adapting to the other culture after having been confronted with it for a long time and allows a dynamic of multiplication of the self to adapt to the different situations one could

encounter but it does not challenge the power structures like Homi K.Bhabha's notion of hybridity (Lindridge and Dhillon 409).

This marginalization, as seen earlier, is perpetuated by Nazneen's arranged marriage to Chanu. Indeed, arranged marriages are a common practice for Islamic households, and the woman's family, and more specifically men, pick their daughter's future husband based on his cast and his ethnic origin (Samad and Eade 50). In that case, Nazneen married a Bengali man who lives in London and therefore, constantly stays within the circle of her Bengali community, isolated in her house as it is her duty to do so and therefore contributes to her lack of assimilation. Moreover, despite Nazneen and her family living in London, Chanu wishes to go back to Bangladesh because he is not able to achieve his failure to succeed in English culture and to accept the discrepancy between his fantasies "built on an institutionalized version of Bangladeshi identity, and what the Western reader takes to be the realities of contemporary Bangladesh revealed in the letters from Nazneen's sister Hasina" (Cormack 702). Moreover, Chanu says that the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore is "the true father of [the nation] and demands his deracinated daughters to learn and recite Tagore's poem "Golden Bengal" to understand their roots which emphasizes his obsession with Bangladesh's past (Cormack 702): "In the sixteenth century, Bengal was called the Paradise of Nations. These are our roots. Do they teach these things in the school here? Does Shahana know about the Paradise of Nations? All she knows about is flood and famine. Whole bloody country is just a bloody case to her." (151).

This idea of a return to the homeland and deep attachment is also expressed by Monica Ali herself, whose mother constantly wished to go back because of her country of origin: On some days, she thought it would be better to face the Pak tanks than the wrath of the crowd that mobbed the booking halls; a neater end to fall beneath the caterpillar tracks. But halfway across the world there was a place she could call home and it gave her strength, time after time, to

push her way through” (Ali n.p). This is indicative of the first generation of immigrants’ deep-rooted attachment to their culture. Indeed, high levels of ethnic, rather than British identity, are found to be more natural for those who intend to return home or who have not acquired citizenship (Heath and Demireva 164).

The issue of immigration and integration is quite different when it comes to *Swing Time* because the nameless narrator was born in a place of in-between, having parents from two different cultures. Therefore, her friend Tracey who shares a similar cultural situation, needs to find a new way to construct their inner selves and negotiate their position in society (Arslanova 2). The two girls are second-generation immigrants which means that they are the children of first generation immigrants and, therefore, are faced with different issues of segmented assimilation which spurred debate about the experiences of the second generation immigrants’ experiences and positions in both the United States and in Europe (Song 1194). Indeed, both of the characters were born in a strong context of cultural hybridity with their parents having different cultures. Intermarriage is both an opportunity of being exposed to a wider cultural opportunity but also makes it difficult to find a true identity, torn between a space of in-betweenness, as explained by Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity (Bhabha). In that case, this notion of hybridity of cultures is completely embodied by the two girls’ existence as a product of two intermingled cultures. One might think that intermarriage is a form of structural assimilation, acceptance, and inclusion to the other’s family and social networks but “we cannot assume that minority individuals (or couples) who have intermarried necessarily feel welcomed or that they straightforwardly belong in mainstream settings” and is automatically devoid of racism and prejudice (Song 1197). In Tracey’s case, her Jamaican father Louie who faces criminal issues, is not present in her daily life which ultimately makes her adapt more to the white British culture of her mother. Indeed, she has a strong interest in ballet, which she calls a white type of dance. Their interest in musicals as young children also emphasizes the idea that

they do not truly belong to a single culture. Indeed, the musicals they used to watch are deeply problematic because black people did not perform tap dancing in the musical *Swing Time*, which is a symbol of Jamaican culture, but instead, some white people did blackface (Scafe 114). However, they both do not see the issue and they continue admiring the dancers and their performances.

Furthermore, the separation of black heritage is seen through the nameless narrator through her unsettled feelings about it and the differences in gender identity. When she visits the slavery museum and the slave trading posts in her travel to West Africa, she is unable to express and feel the desired emotional connection to the site of diasporic origins which gives an example of the inequality of power between races: “Power had preyed on weakness here: all kinds of power- local, racial, royal, global, economic... But power does everywhere... Every tribe has their blood-soaked legacy: here was mine” (316). This passage demonstrates, through the opposition of power and weakness, that she is spiritually detached from the proofs of the suffering that her ancestors went through with the pain of incarceration, capture, and enslavement and ultimately questions the notions of belonging and kinship for mixed children in Britain (Scafe 107).

2. The female protagonists and their cultures

In this part, we will be discussing the female protagonists and their communities to see the role the essential role they play in preserving their cultures in their host country. For this part of the analysis, we will see that it is essential for them to represent their culture while being abroad because they are representatives of their communities but the host country sometimes

makes their integration difficult because of Western values and the complex notion of Britishness as well as the limited success of multiculturalism in Britain.

2.1. Culture of origin

Immigrants are obligated to keep and perpetuate a part of their ethnic tradition because of the influence of their communities and the pressure they feel as cultural representatives. It is important to note that Nazneen's reason for moving to England is her arranged marriage to Chanu which means that she is the object of a transaction between two men: her father and her future husband (Cormack 701). In the Muslim community, when an arranged marriage happens, the family gets involved in the union, linking the private and the public sphere, and the group boundary is sustained. It is often closely related to the notion of endogamy which means that the man chosen for their daughter must not only be part of the community but also has to be within a specific kin group (Samad and Eade 33). Indeed, having an arranged marriage is believed to be diminishing the likelihood of divorce because of their cultural and compatible family backgrounds, and divorce is badly seen by the community (Samad and Eade 41-2). In the novel, Nazneen seems to not allow herself to even wish for a different life: "Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma." (12). The narrator adds later on: "He had made a good marriage for her." (15). Homi K. Bhabha, one of the main thinkers of postcolonial studies, identified how personal and national identity are related in some cultures: "[T]he people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people [...] The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into signs of national culture" (Bhabha 297). This could be linked to Nazneen's behavior being constantly dictated by the pedagogic narration of her origin (Cormack 701). Indeed, Nazneen has learnt, throughout her life, the practices and knowledge

of her community which dictate her life and her actions. As a Bengali woman, she has the duty of transmitting this knowledge which constitutes her personal and national identity. Women are symbols of collectivity, markers of honour, purity, and reproducers of a nation and bear the difficult task of transmitting cultures while men have to act to represent it (Samad and Eade 3). There is a notable difference between the role of men and women in the Bangladeshi culture that is realistically represented in Monica Ali's novel.

As shown through *Brick Lane*'s narrative, women are bearers of their culture and represent them while being abroad while trying to achieve the standards dictated by their families and society. Every relationship in the text is represented as a duty for women: one has to be a dutiful daughter then the wife has to take care of her family, give birth, and raise her children. Indeed, giving birth, and more especially to male offspring, is seen as serving the community (Mortada 54). The first woman we are introduced to is Banesa, Nazneen's mother whose job reminds the reader of women's duty as mothers because her profession involves the birth of babies. Giving birth is a major requirement for South Asian women: giving birth to boys means perpetuating the family lineage whereas girls will be part of their in-laws (Mortada 54). We can see that this view on birth is applicable in the novel because Chanu had great hopes for his deceased son but does not expect anything from his daughters and hardly gets along with them. After their son's passing, their marriage starts to decline as if he had a power linking the two parents together (Mortada 55). At some point, Nazneen also wonders if things would have been different if Shahana was a boy. Moreover, Chanu describes his wife in terms of birth: "Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children" (17).

In addition to having the duty of bearing a child and perpetuating the familial lineage, Bengali women also have to act a certain way. Bengali women are usually described as patient and shy which are two qualities highlighted in the novel. Nazneen's life principle has been inherited from her mother: "What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could

be changed, everything had to be borne” (11). This shows that Nazneen cannot question her fate and have to bear with it: “If God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men” (64). The negative verbs “endure” and “bear” are repeated throughout the narration and emphasize the gap between men and women in the Bengali community. Moreover, her mother’s teachings can be seen in Nazneen’s behavior towards Chanu because she never talks back to him except when he asks a question. She dutifully takes care of him by cutting his nostrils hair and the corn on his feet and does not dare ask him to move when he blocks her way (30). Nazneen’s whole existence seems to be dedicated to her culture, she must not make any mistakes and has to suppress her feelings and desires in the name of her community and principles (Mortada 56). Indeed, as Wilson explains, reputation is a “tremendous, conservative force, controlling, to differing extents, everyone in Asian societies. It is directly related to male pride or Izzat¹.” (104).

When her daughters go out to explore, Nazneen dares not to leave her husband as it would be a “dishonour” to do so (246). Even if she rarely gets out of her house, she has to be accompanied and protected by her husband, living in his shadow: “For a moment she saw herself clearly, following her husband, head bowed, covered, and she was pleased” (210). As explained by Einhorn, women do not only bear the culture of a family or a community but of an entire nation and represent it through their exemplary behaviour and morals (Mortada 55). Indeed, women are responsible for men’s actions and it is their duty to put them back on the right track: “These boys like wax around a flame. They come close and they melt. How can you help this thing? It is you who must take care.” In this extract, Nazneen reads her sister Hasina’s letters who lives in Bangladesh, and who quotes Mr Chowdhury, the man who will rape her later in the narration. Moreover, Hasina is described as a “rotten one” because she goes near men and sexually attracts them. On the contrary, Nazneen is pictured as the perfect and

¹ Indian word for honour, pride and reputation.

accomplished wife, as emphasized by Karim who also shares Chanu's ideology as he says that Nazneen is "the real thing", "A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home" (380). When Nazneen shares her desire to study English, her husband answers "Where's the need anyway?" (28) and when she wants to go to college with her friend Razia, he says: "You're going to be a mother." (62). It is safe to say that Bengali men's views are forced upon their women who have to dedicate their lives to their families and community by erasing their own individual identity and making integration into England nearly impossible.

In the novel *Swing Time*, characters have different cultural experiences because they are naturally more exposed to variety than Nazneen. Second-generation immigrants like the nameless narrator and her friend Tracey, when adolescents, are more likely to be subject to their parents' influence and therefore highlight the role of families and the school on their spiritual development (Song 1195). The two mixed girls are a great example of the theory of "segmented assimilation". As its name indicates, it is one's experience of various cultures depending on factors like social class, ethnicity, race, and the resources that are available to them daily. It challenges the traditional notion of assimilation and seeks to explain the different patterns and the integration of an immigrant in his or her host country. The segmented assimilation theory includes that young mixed children who delay assimilation into the mainstream and who are not fully integrated into either their father's or their mother's cultures are most likely to succeed at school and in their social environment (Song 1195). In this novel, intermarriage has a big role to play in the protagonist's integration into society because she is constantly exposed to a variety of cultures that influence her behavior and her identity. Indeed, low rates of intermarriage have long been interpreted as an indicator of strong ethnic identities, which could partially explain Nazneen's situation in *Brick Lane*. On the contrary, intermarriage is believed to decrease the future generations' view on the significance of cultural distinctiveness because they will be less likely to identify with one single racial or ethnic group (Song 1201). In a study

exploring intermarriage and mixed-race young people in Britain, researchers found that most university student respondents chose the term “British” which was believed to transcend any notion of race and was more inclusive of everyone who had grown up in London, regardless of race and ethnicity: “respondents who had grown up in London tended to articulate a hybridized cosmopolitan view of culture and belonging, while race was regarded as of decreasing importance” (Song 1203). Hybridization was a term originally used in cultural studies that had a clear racial meaning and warned about the possible dangers of interracial mixtures and the new “forms” it created. In today’s society, we use this word to talk about a sense of balance between two cultures, creating a new identity (Arslanova 5-6). When she was young, the nameless narrator was often confronted with this issue:

[My parents were asked] How will she choose between your cultures? To the point that sometimes I felt the whole purpose of my childhood was to demonstrate to the less enlightened that I was not confused and not troubled choosing. [...] I was strange to my mother and to my father, a changeling belonging to neither of them, and although this is of course true to all children, in the end— we are not our parents and they’re not us.” (157).

We can see that there is societal pressure that goes beyond the familial borders and that the protagonist is detached from both of her parents despite their good relationship (Arslanova 46). She cannot “pick a side”, as British society expects her to do. Furthermore, the nameless narrator finds comfort in Tracey’s similarity as mixed children: “Our shade of brown was exactly the same- as if one piece of tan material was cut to make us both” (9) but cannot identify to her own half-siblings. Indeed, her father had a previous marriage and comes to visit the nameless narrator and her mother. This passage is very significant to understand the struggle of belonging experienced by the young woman. When she faces her half-sister she explains the

awkwardness of the situation: “The girl turned to me, and we stared frankly at each other [...] Apart from the comically obvious fact that I was black and she was white [...] I felt we both saw [the similarities] [...] He made one like me and one like her. How can two such different creatures emerge from the same source?” (44-5). In this scene, it is the very first time that she experiences black oppression in society because her half-sister is scared of her and refuses to get in the house despite being biologically related to the nameless narrator. Moreover, it is important to note that they do not see each other until their father’s funeral. The nameless narrator’s half-brother also shows a kind of racism toward the narrator’s mother because he despises her for her skin color and her union with their father: “He don’t care about no one. [...] He’s fucked up in the head. Marrying that bloody spade!” (157). While Nazneen relies on her ethnic community for emotional, social, and practical support because she has little to no connection with the outside world and therefore embodies her culture of origin, *Swing Time*’s nameless narrator is in a place of in-betweenness and is detached from both of her cultures despite being constantly exposed to them.

2.2. The host country’s contributions

The immigrants’ and their families’ integration is often difficult and partially made possible because the opportunities offered by the host country are sometimes limited and could have both a negative and a positive impact on the creation of their individual identities.

In the novel *Swing Time*, despite the nameless protagonist sharing an undeniable connection with her friend Tracey, she has a quite different experience of her cultural hybridity because, unlike her friend, she enjoys upward social mobility because of employment

opportunities. Indeed, we learn that they both grow up in the same working class but the narrator's white British father gets promoted at his job at the postal service. This privilege brought about by her father's better income facilitates both her mother and the narrator's academic education and ultimately their ascent to the top layers of the political and societal arena (Kürpick 334). However, the nameless narrator is unable to view cultural discourses and socio-economic structures as critically as her friend Tracey does because of her involvement in Western British discourse and education while adapting to dominant identity concepts. Therefore, her political awareness is impossible due to this positioning and agency which "protect her from being vulnerable to the consequences of embodied intersectional difference as Tracey is." (Kürpick 334).

Their difference in their social and economic background can be seen in Tracey's different experiences of school which has an impact on her social isolation and the reinforcement of her boundaries as she grows up. She is looked down on by female schoolmates for showing too much skin: "with terrible relish, unzipping slowly and in such a way that her breasts were presented to the rest of us with as much impact as possible, barely contained by an unsuitable top that showed off her abundance where the rest of us still only had nipples and bones." (168). Moreover, she is hated by everyone because of her "rebellious and unsuitable" behaviour: "everybody 'knew' it cost 50p to 'touch Tracey's tits' [...] all the girls united in shunning her, black, white and brown." (168). Tracey also gets humiliated by the narrator's father, who she looks up to, when she shows a middle class accent and wears middle-class clothes during an encounter "brand-new style from a different neighborhood, a different world" (263) and separates them in two different worlds: "But you're not serious, are you, Trace? Stop it with all that- it's just us here! No need to talk fancy with us. We know you, we've known you since you were this high, you don't have to pretend to be Lady Muck with us!" (262-3). This extract and the father's reaction to her change in attitude reminds the reader of "the expectation

of unchanging and unitary gender class identities with specific discursive and material registers attached” (Kürpick 337). On the one hand, this wish to integrate the social middle-class and the Western discourse helps Tracey in the professional context because she temporarily transcends binary identity categories by remind of her hybridity and get access to new resources but it also results in her isolation provoked by her peers in her private life and “reduces the scope of her supportive network and shrinks her socio-economic agency.” (Kürpick 338). Unfortunately, later in the novel, Tracey is obliged to quit her job when she gives birth to three children and totally isolates her from the rest of society.

The nameless narrator’s experience and social trajectory counterpoints her friend’s because of her parents’ opposite backgrounds and because she grows up with the mobility and socio-economic agency Tracey lacks. She is privileged because she can study at the university and gets a position as a broadcaster on YTV² and integrates Aimee, a worldwide known pop star, circle by becoming one of her assistants. Thanks to this opportunity, she is able to overcome any potential negative impact of her mixity which allows her to discover new spaces and cultural contexts through interconnectedness. Through her travels to New York and West Africa, she is able to encounter her “critical and self-reflective peers” who “eventually make her aware of colonial power structures, and prompt her to reflect on her own positions and actions.” (Kürpick 338-9). From this job position, she gets housing benefits with a room in Aimee’s house and an alternative flat in New York City (363) keeps these benefits after being fired because she is offered a separate apartment in London (436). Her conditions are elevated to an upper middle class and adapts to her new environment having, for instance, “perfect[ed] that very British skill” (150) of having office drinking parties but she slowly gets too dependent on these resources. Indeed, because of this elevated position, she gives up friendships, her wish to have a partner and children as well as her strong ties with her mother because Aimee wishes

² A parody of MTV

her “to be untethered” (150). There is a clear process of assimilation thanks to the opportunities offered by the host country but which ultimately makes her almost completely detach from her Jamaican roots. Travelling is a chance that was made possible by her favourable position in her host country, however, it makes the narrator be “in a weird state of timelessness” (149) and her mother emphasizes the instability of home, belonging, and cultural and racial identity that her daughter seems to experience: “People come from somewhere, they have roots- you’ve let this woman pull yours right out of the ground. You don’t live anywhere, you don’t have anything, you’re constantly on a plane.” (155).

Despite the opportunities offered by her job that make her able to connect once again with her childhood, sing a song from the musical *Gypsy* in New York (136-7), and to be able to find “the joy [she had] been looking for all [her] life” (165) in West Africa when she dances with the villagers during a celebration and using her instinct (417), her performances are not completely satisfactory to the people’s expectation because she accidentally continues to sing after the end of the song and the villagers see her dancing as not accurately corresponding to black people’s dancing skills (Kürpick 340). Indeed, she is perceived as white by other black people because she is incompatible with the identity she tries to impersonate (417) and her hybridity repeatedly resurfaces highlighting the differences in her consciousness and her environment throughout the novel. Therefore, some black diasporic identifications seem to be uncertain, contradictory, and provisional (Scafe 105). Furthermore, identities can have multiple identifications depending on one’s socio-cultural context. There is, for instance, a very clear difference between Jamaicans living in Jamaica and Jamaicans living in England even though they share a cultural essence (Voicu 327). The narrator’s lack of political consciousness is reflected in her conscious detachment from history and her responsibility and with her insensitivity regarding power structures (Kürpick 341). Indeed, she helps Aimee’s neo-colonial practices and cultural appropriation through the construction project of a girl-only school and

is partially responsible for the old school's deterioration, the infrastructural and medical conditions and the water quality, because of the withdrawal of government subsidies (300). The myth of the "White savior" is demystified and is shown to be untrue by the author yet still commonly believed in today's society and more specifically in the West.

Even though the situation is arguably different in the two novels, their similarity remains undeniable. Indeed, in *Brick Lane*, the reader is confronted with the double bind of female migrants treated as aliens by their host country, just like the nameless narrator who is portrayed as neither white nor black, and there is this perception of women being treated as commodities by men in their ethnical communities (Cormack 700). However, there is a paradox in the migration phenomenon which is shown through Nazneen's relationships. At first, Nazneen is introduced as a woman who has cultural significance within her community and who never questions its authority: "As Nazneen grew, she heard many times this story [...] It was because her mother's wise decision that Nazneen lived to become the wide-faced, watchful girl she was. Fighting against one's Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, or perhaps most times, it can be fatal. Not once did Nazneen question the logic of the story." (10). However, she soon realizes, through her different encounters the possibility of another type of cultural experience she knows nothing about. Indeed, the confrontation between Chanu and Mrs. Azad, the Anglicized wife of Dr. Azad, is significant because it gives the protagonist a first glimpse of what the outside world might be like and introduces the dilemma of identifying with an unreal home and living in a society in which ethnic communities are perceived as aliens:

I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family." (92).

The immigrant tragedy, as Chanu portrays it, emphasizes a deep identity issue for immigrants in their host country and the impossibility of complete assimilation and therefore, integration because of the clash of cultures. However, the reader might be thinking that what he describes is rather Nazneen's situation and not his own. He is the "educated man", the moneymaker of this household, but expresses his wish to go back to his home country because he may have false beliefs about Bangladesh.

Mrs. Azad, who values assimilation, answers that his arguments are "crap" and highlights the fact that they willingly came to England (92-3). She also has an opposite view on Western values and is happy that her daughter has adopted them and claims that assimilation is inevitable. She contrasts the life she has to live in Bangladesh with the life of women like Nazneen who "spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two or three words of English" here in London, where she personally feels completely free to choose between Bangladeshi and Western cultures (93). However, the reader is soon exposed to the consequences of assimilation as a loss in physical attractiveness (Cormack 704). Indeed, Mrs. Azad is described as having an "opulent backside" and "large brown thighs" and who adjusts "her underwear with a thumb" (88). She is the symbol of a woman gone bad due to Western influence and is described in a vulgar way: she smokes, drinks, and burps loudly (Mortada 55). This notion is further implied by Mr. Azad who is described as ashamed of his wife and seen by Nazneen as a man who has lost all sense of pride and has a broken home. The protagonist's reaction is expected by the reader because she was taught to condemn "immoral" actions but betrays her own ethnic values when she has an affair with Karim. The diversity of the characters and their different reaction to Western values and the notion of assimilation is significant because they maintain what Homi K. Bhabha would describe as "cultural diversity" which are the conflicting cultural essences to which an

individual may remain loyal or to which one may assimilate (Bhabha 34). He opposes this notion to the notion of “cultural difference” in which “the signs of affiliation are constructed differentially, with no underlying truth that can put an end to their infinite semiosis” (Cormack 704).

2.3. Identity and Citizenship: the politics of Great Britain

Great Britain’s politics and the notion of Britishness have changed significantly over the centuries with the growing importance of multiculturalism encouraged by the migration flows. However, multiculturalism can be considered both a success and a failure when taking into account the historical and political evolution of the nation.

The term “multiculturalism” was used in 1941 to describe a cosmopolitan society until the definition we use today was adopted in 1970 and qualifies the political goal to promote diversity (Doytcheva 3). Multiculturalism is a complex notion closely related to the migration flows which are now more diverse than they used to be regarding immigrants’ destination choices and the reasons for their moving (Doytcheva 3). Moreover, it draws our attention to the social organization of ethno-religious and cultural differentiation and emphasizes the idea that culture is not an individual phenomenon but is rather characterized by social institutions that interact, evolve, and decay in the situation of cultural exchange (Doytcheva 4). However, migration crisis debates still question East migrations’ impact on Europe and the issue of cultural assimilation (Arslanova 1). Moreover, there is a belief that anti-discrimination measures are not necessarily treated as multicultural demands which focus more on the acceptance of a culture (Heath and Demireva 165). A study on the consequences of multiculturalism found that second-

generation immigrants is a less important hostility to intermarriage and are more likely to feel integrated and British than the first generation (Song 1197). As Monica Ali explains in an interview, kids in her family went to school in England and stopped speaking and understanding Bengali; she adds that “the new status quo was accepted” and that their wish to go back to Bangladesh ultimately disappeared. She explains that her father would say: “I just got stuck here, that’s all” and that home could never be reached and became mythical (Ali n.p). In the novel *Brick Lane*, we get an insight into the disorientation and frustration that a generation faces when caught between cultures and struggles to define itself on its own terms and according to its own beliefs and choices through the conflicts between Nazneen, Chanu, and their daughters (Hiddleston 61).

However, there is a rise in the willingness to support violent protests for all ethnicities in the second generation (Heath and Demireva 165). In *Brick Lane*, the Islamic group meetings highlight the complexities and challenges faced by the community in the multicultural city of London through gender dynamics, generational gaps, and cultural clashes that they face as immigrants in a foreign land (Hiddleston 61). It also emphasizes the significance of finding a sense of belonging that seems to be partially attainable because of the limits of multiculturalism. Furthermore, Great Britain’s colonial past could still have some impact on the current nation’s sense of citizenship. For instance, the reconfiguration of England after decolonization recharged white people’s self-consciousness about their existence as white persons and they felt that their British identity was threatened by immigrants (Schwarz). This point could, to some extent, be exemplified through the character of Aimee in the novel *Swing Time*. The nameless narrator and her friend Tracey had a very positive image of her as children: she represented a kind of goal and an idol figure for the two. The famous pop star, originally from Australia, is said to live life to the fullest unlike the narrator’s entourage, and is described as having “no tragic side” (74) which emphasizes her privileged position. Aimee embodies a certain cosmopolitanism through

her appearance: “The palest Australian I ever saw. Sometimes, without her make-up on, she didn’t look like she was from a warm planet at all, and she took a step to keep it that way, protecting herself from the sun at all times. There was something alien about her, a person who belongs to a tribe of one.” (97). The nameless narrator describes her as someone who has no trace of belonging to a certain culture or even to a specific gender through the diversity of her songs (Arslanova 55-56). Aimee, therefore, embodies a form of cultural transcendence that first seems appealing to the narrator who is in a position of in-betweenness. However, the pop star soon almost accuses the protagonist of her belonging: “But we’re not in Bendigo anymore! You’ve left Bendigo— right? Like Baldwin left Harlem. Like Dylan left... wherever... Sometimes you gotta get out— get the fuck out of Bendigo!” (140). Aimee’s significant use of the city Bendigo is emphasized in this passage because it is the city she was born in and therefore, the symbol of a past that the narrator needs to detach from to truly be herself.

However, even though Aimee was a symbol of freedom and opportunity like multiculturalism which also represented new opportunities for England and the immigrants, the narrator starts seeing the ugly truth behind that woman’s decisions about ending poverty in Africa with the creation of a girl-only school and detaches from her (Arslanova 57). Moreover, there might be a deliberate irony from the author in the name chosen for the character Aimee because it is derived from the word “aimé” in French, meaning “loved” or “beloved”. Indeed, the meaning of her name contrasts with her actions, her selfishness, and her exploitative nature. The influence of past history and white people as world saviors is expressed once again, in the narrator’s mother’s reaction to this story: “White woman saves Africa. Is that the idea? Very old idea.” (126). Indeed, the author wished to emphasize the repetitiveness of history, and its associated beliefs through the mentions of historically resonant figures such as Astaire, Le Gon, Judy Garland and Bojangles and maps its progress as “recursive rather than linear” (Scafe 111). The character of Aimee reminds the readers of this colonial tendency of suppressing cultural

myths and symbols by local elites and therefore, reminds us of the need to bring culture and nation into alignment for England's multicultural identity and Britishness to be more efficient and more widely accessible to everyone in the future regardless of gender, race, culture or class (Voicu 329-30).

3. Female protagonists against stereotypes

In this part, we will see that stereotypes are both an obstacle and an opportunity for the female protagonists to emancipate from restrictions set on them by society and their communities in order to build their own individual identities as women while finding a balance between their culture and the host country's values and practices.

3.1. The use of stereotypes

In the two diasporic novels, the protagonists are faced with prejudices coming from both their ethnic communities and multicultural Britain and therefore reinforcing the novels' realism. Authors use stereotypes not only on ethnicity and race but also on gender to denounce the negative view that some people still have nowadays to be able to detach from them and create an opportunity to emancipate. Indeed, the "Other", as opposed to the self, is necessary for one's cultural and psychological development and enables a "cultural alterity" (Voicu 336). However, the use of stereotypes was not welcomed by the Bengali community in the novel *Brick Lane* because it talks about the real Brick Lane district, and the author's representation of the Bengali community was judged too stereotypical and negative. Moreover, there were protests of over a hundred people in 2006 around the movie adaptation of the novel *Brick Lane* which resulted in

heated national debate (Alexander 202). If we look at the novel in a different way, we can see that the story asks the reader to interrogate his or her quick assumptions about ethnic identities and communities rather than simply criticizing them.

Through this novel, Monica Ali tries to give shape and to put under the spotlight those who live in the shadows of permanent misconceptions and stereotypes, confined in a place that is protected from the public gaze. Moreover, in the narrative, we discover the “occluded lives of the disenfranchized while also, paradoxically, showing the pervasive influence of myth in our apprehension of ‘Eastern’ cultures.” (Hiddleston 60). At the beginning of the novel, Nazneen’s mother “had been ripening like a mango on a tree” (13) and is described as “more desiccated than an old coconut” (14). The imagery used in this passage is very stereotypical and is a caricature of the “Other” who could be perceived in such an absurd way by Westerners. Furthermore, the reader is forced to consider his or her implication and effects of common stereotypes right from the beginning of the novel with Rupban’s surprise at the premature birth of her child: “She claimed, too, one thousand babies of which only three were cripples, two were mutants (a hermaphrodite and a humpback), one a stillbirth and another a monkey-lizard-hybrid-sin-against-God-that-was-buried-alive-in-the-faraway-forest-and-the-mother-sent-hence-to-who-cares-where.” (14). Indeed, in this passage, Monica Ali describes the scene comically and integrated hints of unexplained customs and fantastic analogies (Hiddleston 61). This comical effect is also seen in the juxtaposition of Hamid’s remarkable indifference when greeting Nazneen’s birth before the narrative evokes curry smells:

‘A girl’ said Rupban.

‘I know. Never mind’, said Hamid. ‘What can you do?’ And he went away again.

Mumtaz came in with a tin plate of rice, dal and chicken curry. (16)

This passage is significant to the narrative because it highlights foreigners’ preconceptions of Asian culture and reminds us of what we said earlier about Brick Lane’s district and its association with strong curry smells in Westerners’ minds.

Furthermore, Hasina’s letters and her naivety reinforce the assumptions about the subordination of women in postcolonial Islamic societies (Hiddleston 62). Indeed, she refuses to get into an arranged marriage and decides to follow her heart and marry the one she loves but her marriage falls apart: her husband becomes violent and she has to work as a maid and as a prostitute. Through her letters, she tries to warn her sister about the restrictions of tradition:

You know my husband tell me this. First moment he see me it the perfect moment in his whole and entire life. This is how he say. In his whole and entire life. He like to live it again and he planning to make it come again as an actual fact. He have me sit in bed and put my hair in certain way over one shoulder [...] I must tilt my face so or so. But light is never right. I hold head too tight or too loose. It hard for him not to get angry he trying to make something perfect (177-178).

In this passage, Monica Ali displays the belief that Asian women have difficulty understanding and expressing their position through the use of broken English (Hiddleston 62).

Furthermore, Nazneen’s growing interest in the Bengal Tigers and most specifically in Karim shows that religion is always apprehended through stereotypes and symbols. Indeed, Islam is often associated with radicalism and terrorism but in the story, the author makes it clear

that the characters' anger is not incomprehensible and mythical but highlights their despair regarding their unequal status in society. Moreover, there is a reference to the media and the spreading of false information when the characters find out about Muslim riots in Oldham. The passage focuses on the movements of the camera and the choice of setting rather than on the event and how riots are reconstructed is "as significant in fuelling stereotypes as the violence itself" (Hiddleston 68). Another example could be found near the end of the novel when the media wanted to record a drug scandal, an evidence of poverty and delinquency, even though there was nothing to record:

Television crews came in the afternoon. There was nothing to film, so they filmed each other. They returned after dark and filmed the boys riding around in cars. They found the disused flats where the addicts gathered to socialize with their addictions, and filmed the grotty mattresses and the bits of silver foil. It was a sensation. It was on the local news (406).

This passage is important to note because it emphasizes the destructive potential of myths and how they are created to reinforce beliefs that might be untrue about communities and spread them to a wider public.

In *Swing Time*, the role of black women as caretakers of their homes is also highlighted but the tradition is dropped and aspirations of more freedom are emphasized. Indeed, the protagonist's mother is not content with her role as an housekeeper and decides to take open-university courses while "plotting the escape from motherhood" (18). Throughout the novel, the narrator notes that she and her father have to leave the house for her mother to study in a more peaceful environment, dedicating her entire day to her education and to her evolving as an independent woman (Arslanova 47). When the two parents divorce, she can live a life without depending on her husband and acquires an important position in the politics of her area

to give a voice to her community and to those who cannot be heard. Moreover, it is significant to note that the narrator's mother used the hardships of her childhood and her experiences in a poor and big family and channeled it into the social and political fights she now dedicates her daily life (Arslanova 47). In that case, the protagonist's mother breaks free from stereotypes and uses them to find strength to fight for herself. Furthermore, the narrator is an only child and we learn that her mother refuses to sacrifice a part of her life to another child like the women in her family did: "Her mother had birthed seven children, her grandmother, eleven." (19). She always reminds her daughter that it is important to get educated and convinces her to get a college education as she did, and that she doesn't want her to have to bear this tradition of being "a child with a child" (22). Indeed, she believes that a child is a threat to one's freedom and personal development and that giving birth to a child should not be forced by the community but that it should be a personal choice. Nazneen, on the contrary, embodies everything that the narrator's mother fears about her child: submission to tradition and self-sacrifice.

Through the narrative, the nameless narrator's mother turned into a black activist who is completely different from Tracey's mother who is "White, obese, afflicted with acne. She wore her thin blond hair pulled back very tightly in what I knew my mother would call a 'Kilburn facelift'"(10). We do not know what she does for a living, perhaps she works in Archie's paper-folding business, but she is constantly said to be watching TV, extremely laid-back, eating unhealthy food, and spoiling Tracey with expensive toys. On the contrary, the protagonist's mother is always well put, wears make up, and has a short afro (Arslanova 46). The nameless narrator could realize the difference between the two mothers: "I couldn't help but notice the placidity of a small, all-female household." (35) which emphasizes Tracey's criminal father's absence and the calmness and passivity of white culture (Arslanova 49). This difference could be explained by the black mother's burning passion and desire to overcome society's obstacles and inequalities meanwhile Tracey's white mother's laid-back and passive attitude reminds the

reader of her comfortable integration into British Western society without having to make any effort.

The two novels' authors use stereotypes to emphasize the need to challenge limiting views and free the people, and more specifically women, from the perceptions the society associates them with. Indeed, prejudice reinforces patterns of oppression and inequality. But ultimately, it will encourage anyone suffering from it to find their true and unique identity and celebrate their individuality with no limitations.

3.2 The place of women in society

In this part, we will see that women end up revealing and unveiling themselves because they can emancipate themselves from aspects of their culture that make them invisible to society and which lead them to find their true liberated selves.

Monica Ali explained that people living “disparate lives drawn together by the common goal of self-empowerment” were her main interests when writing her novel (Ali n.p). In *Brick Lane*, we can distinguish two types of women: those who carry out their prescribed roles and those who defy societal rules and live the life they want to live. Nazneen, despite being a bearer of her culture and embodying everything that is expected from a Bengali woman, her behaviour starts shifting through the narrative and more especially when she gets a glimpse of the outside world through her relationship with Karim. Indeed, Karim represents a more Western way for genders to interact and while her husband never listens to her, Karim “made her feel as if she had said a weighty piece, as if she had stated a new truth” (216) and allows her to live outside

of the pedagogic construction of individual and cultural identity dictated by her community (Cormack 704). She realizes that her extra-marital affair with him is forbidden because it could ruin her own and her family's: "Everything goes against it. Family, duty, everything." (358). However, she is not bothered when her husband comes back home and finds Karim on the computer; it is "the first real stoicism she had shown to the course of her fate" (287). Therefore, this passage is a turning point in her evolution and her liberation as a woman. The purchase of a computer and of a sewing machine has a great impact on Nazneen's life because she can start working to pay off the debts that her husband has accumulated because of Mrs. Islam (Cormack 706).

The protagonist's bravery is further shown when she refuses to leave London and go back to Bangladesh with her husband. This passage emphasizes that she is now capable of taking care of herself and her daughters in a country quite unfamiliar to her and therefore, obtains some cultural and personal freedom (Mortada 2010). However, we can note that Nazneen had idealized this young man who in fact, is not exactly the way she pictured him. The plot seems to lean towards a marriage between the two but as she evolved, Nazneen realizes the nature of Karim's love for her: "A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her." (380). Furthermore, as she gets familiar with the English language, she realizes that he stutters in both Bengali and English and that he is not as impressive as he used to be. Their mutual perceptions were incorrect and separated them: "I wasn't me, and you weren't you. From the very beginning to the very end, we didn't see things. What we did— we made each other up." (380). Indeed, these instances force her into an existentialist realization that accepting his love would be a form of rejection of pedagogy to accept another (Cormack 706). Instead, the protagonist "embraces a performance of her identity without the stable compass points her national and religious background have created." (Cormack 706) And the novel ends with a self-authoring woman who is free to go skating with her daughters and her

friend Razia, a powerful image of self-empowerment and change in the originally isolated protagonist's life who can pursue her dreams and decides for herself.

Other clear examples of women empowerment are the women who surround Nazneen and play an important role in her rising self-consciousness. Her sister Hasina, despite the hardships and the judgment she faces, keeps on pursuing the life she has always wanted and documents it by sending letters to Nazneen who is exposed to a new way of living one's life as a woman. Despite things not always going her way, it is important to note that she freely expresses her sexuality and chooses her husband, going against what is expected from her by her community. Moreover, she partially liberates Nazneen by revealing the truth about their "exemplary" mother who committed suicide to escape her marriage. Razia, Nazneen's dearest friend, is the protagonist's complete opposite because she is dressed in Western attire, smokes, and works which is everything her community does not want her to. Therefore, she is a great example of a freer woman who does not bend to her husband's will and who can provide for her family when he dies. Furthermore, she faces all the challenges life brings her and does not need anyone's help even when she discovers that her son does drugs (Mortada 58). She is significant to Nazneen's evolution because she is the person she can talk to without being judged even when it comes to sensitive subjects like her affair with Karim. We are not given any reasons to despise her, on the contrary, we could even be able to relate to her and feel empathy when she is misunderstood by her community, like Mrs. Azad. By including these aspects in the plot, Monica Ali wished to illuminate a set of lives that has constantly been forgotten and that lived in the shadows of other structures of authority and uncovered subjectivities that have been deprived of a public voice, representing a type of feminism for female characters (Hiddleston 59).

The notion of feminism is omnipresent in the novel *Swing Time* in which female characters are in constant tension with dominant views on women and their role in society and their culture.

This novel can be explored through Rosi Braidotti's feminist theory of nomadism which overcomes deterministic and essentialistic hegemonic concepts of identity (Kürpick). Indeed, this theory reimagines the body as a "performative becoming" capable of transcending fixed identities and variables such as race, class, ethnicity, and age but presupposes a need for material and cultural privilege like a political consciousness or an individual awareness of power relations (Kürpick 332). Unlike the nameless protagonist, who lacks political consciousness because of the comfortable position she is in, her friend Tracey lacks socio-economic agency and social mobility and is constantly exposed to discriminations which increases her political awareness and leads her to engage in transgressive nomadic performances (Kürpick 334). Indeed, Tracey earns a part in a musical in which people of color obtain marginal roles and strives to perfect her ballet skills, which she associates with "white music" (24) to subvert the power relations at work. In the musical "Guys and Dolls", she uses an excessive performance of her femininity to deviate the audience's attention from the white female star to herself, a black dancer in a supporting role (347). Moreover, she reappropriates choreography elements of Fred Astaire in *Royal Wedding*, which is very significant to emphasize because Astaire did blackface, and ultimately gains socio-economic benefit from it (Kürpick 336). Furthermore, Tracey has an affair with Calky, which disturbs gender, class, and patriarchal hierarchies because he is a Kenyan man from an upper middle-class family but occupies an inferior position compared to her. Indeed, she engages in an extra-marital affair with him and therefore obtains power over him and gains material benefit by reversing the patterns of the male "breadwinner" (Kürpick 336). Tracey earns a living from dancing but also earns education and pocket money from her lover: it is "her socio-economically marginalized position depriving her of supportive networks and access to social capital that almost inevitably compels her to rely on transgression and exploitation to get into a position where equal terms of exchange may apply." (Kürpick 337). The nameless protagonist finally realizes that she is partially responsible for her friend's

marginalized position because she mistaken her e-mails and her helplessness for blackmailing: “She left her back there, in the ranks of the unwitnessed where you have to scream to get heard” (448). It is at the end of the novel that the nameless narrator acquires a political consciousness and realizes that she, along with her mother, has subjected Tracey to class bias from an early age (Kürpick 343).

The narrator’s mother reflects on the feminist praxis of black British feminists in the twentieth century while being on a journey of intellectual and social achievement (Scafe 97). Her clear goal is to emancipate as a woman and opposes herself to the role of care. Indeed, while the nameless narrator’s father is relegated to the domestic sphere, her mother emphasizes “the importance of having a revolutionary consciousness, or the relative insignificance of sexual love when placed beside the struggles of the people, or the legacy of slavery” (35). She chooses a life for herself and does not perform the role of caretaker in her relationships to fully live and experience. The novel shares a feminism that is shaped by the experience of the diaspora in Britain and which essence comes from an anti-imperial and anti-colonial ideology (Scafe 103). Black feminism suggests an international understanding of the issue of colonization because the narrator’s mother, who is also nameless in the novel, shows a commitment to nuclear disarmament which reminds the reader of issues like nuclear testing and uranium mining which take place outside of the nation (Scafe 103). The mother’s activism with her attendance at Saturday demonstrations, her affiliation with politics of the IRA and Tamil Tigers, and her opposition to the shrinking state, highlights her participation in Britain as a full citizen who can make her voice be heard (Scafe 103). Indeed, she becomes a member of Parliament for Brent West while remembering and honouring the past to make some change for her people in the country.

Despite not always agreeing with her mother's activism, the nameless narrator describes her mother as a heroic and influential figure in her life, ultimately shaping her as a young woman: "She was a feminist" (9) and "a young mum [...] There were things she wanted to be but she couldn't, not then— she was trapped. She had to fight for any time for herself." (111). Indeed, the nameless protagonist is, to some extent, influenced by her mother's ideology because when she is exposed to racism and sexism, she says that she can hear her mother in her mind whispering "ironic commentary, pouring poison in my ear from thousands of miles away." (127). Indeed, racism and sexism are part of her mother's activism and everyday battle for empowerment. Furthermore, it is significant to note that the nameless protagonist's mother has not forgotten about her past but utilizes it to live her life to the full, free from the burdens of her difficult past. Indeed, she has experienced poverty and sacrificed her education to have a child but she no longer wanted to be secondary, which we could also link to Nazneen's self-realization at the end of *Brick Lane* (Scafe 101). Moreover, we are told that the nameless protagonist's mother had suffered from seeing her mother migrate to England and struggle financially to care for her family (20), hence her wish to break free from her role as a caretaker and to educate herself to become more independent and to have an impact on the Western society as both a person of color and as a woman. The nameless narrator concludes, at the end of the novel and when she finally gains political and social consciousness, that she wants to build her own identity: "an idea, new to me, that there might be something else I could offer, something simpler, more honest, between my mother's idea of salvation and nothing at all." (453).

3.3 A true quest for identity

In this part, we will see that the female protagonists are on a constant identity quest. Indeed, they wonder about their place as women in society and how to find a balance between integrating Britain without erasing their ethnic culture and which they ultimately manage to do.

Through the experience of a hybrid environment the female protagonists evolve in, they are ultimately led to create and adapt their identity to both the space they live in and the people they interact with, within or outside their family circle. However, it is significant to highlight that one could have a double identity with a collective and an individual one. This idea could be seen as the two identities which are in constant conflict and that collective identity cannot replace an individual one. On the other hand, we could argue that one's collective identity is constructed on a different basis and can be differentiated from one's individual identity and that the two can coexist (Voicu 328). Moreover, identity is said to be a sense of self at a given time which constantly evolves with time through past and future experiences and is influenced by a large number of social constructs such as race, religion, gender, language, profession, and so on (Arslanova 9).

At first, Nazneen wanted to eventually go back to Bangladesh because her culture represented a safe place for her and provided stability (Hiddleston 66). Indeed, when faced she had to meet Dr. Azad, she found comfort in the Qu'ran: "The words calmed her stomach and she was pleased." (14). Even though she did not always understand its words, the soothing association calmed her mind as she "knows Islam through the sounds of its signifiers rather than through its underlying truths." (14). However, by the end of the novel, one can argue that she has not necessarily lost her attachment to her culture but that her experience of the outside world gave her a chance to detach herself from certain restrictions and start an adaptation

process in her host country by refusing to go back to Bangladesh. Homi K. Bhabha's notion of hybridity is significant to explain how two cultures intermingle in colonial and postcolonial relationships. Indeed, this theory applies to both novels because the characters experience two cultures and live in a "Third Space of Enunciation" (Bhabha 276), in which they are faced with both cultures daily, and which constructs the protagonists' new hybrid identities. Stuart Hall suggests that this place of in-betweenness, completely embodied by *Swing Time*'s mixed protagonist, is an "act of imaginative rediscovery" of an individual's fragmented experiences (Arslanova 10).

For the nameless protagonist, who was born of a Jamaican mother and a white British father, this hybridity is completely experienced all through her life. We can see that in the novel, she cannot eliminate any part of her heritage and feels this tension within her from a young age, along with her friend Tracey. Meanwhile, her half-siblings could adjust to the world "with a certain slowness, through the years" (157), she has to constantly wonder about her place in the world (Arslanova 50). This identity crisis is reinforced by her mother who disagrees with the narrator's meeting with her siblings and Tracey because "she knows where she comes from and where she is going" (31). However, this is a difficult situation for the narrator who is not understood by her family and who cannot fully relate to her mother's heritage and cultural history nor her half-siblings, indeed, "she does not belong to either of the cultures yet she belongs to both of them" (Arslanova 50). The issue faced by mixed children was also highlighted by Monica Ali who personally experiences it. Indeed, her novel *Brick Lane* was at the heart of controversy because of Bengali cultural misinterpretation, therefore, doubting her legitimacy because she wrote about a community in which she does not "truly belong". She answered these accusations by stating: "Perhaps, the answer is I can write about it because I do not truly belong. Growing up with an English mother and a Bengali father means never being an insider. Standing neither behind a closed door, nor in the thick of things, but rather in the

shadow of the doorway, is a good place from which to observe” (Ali n.p). This statement could apply to the nameless protagonist who lives in the shadow of others and to some extent, to Nazneen as well. Zadie Smith also talked about her experience as a mixed person and how the issue of inheritance and the passing of culture is difficult: “When you come from a mixed-race family, it makes you think a bit harder about inheritance and what’s passed from generation to generation” (Merritt n.p). Moreover, both novels’ protagonists are paradoxically resistant and compelled by their host land paradigm whose diasporic discourse includes mobility and stillness, the crossing of boundaries, and the mixing of experiences (Scafe 95). In the end, *Swing Time*’s nameless protagonist who was completely detached from her roots, reconnects to them by going back to her childhood district, Willesden after years of travels and mobility. Moreover, both protagonists are in a search for a home and for an identity: Nazneen finally starts exploring the outside world and the nameless protagonist reconnects to her Jamaican roots while trying to find a middle ground in the multicultural city of London.

Conclusion

In the two novels’ *Swing Time* (2016) by Zadie Smith and *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali, female protagonists come from immigrant families with different socio-cultural backgrounds. Despite their origin, their reluctance, and their different social backgrounds, these women try to find a balance to preserve their cultures while integrating into their host country, England, and more specifically the multicultural city of London. Both stories seem to revolve around the solving of a common issue for the protagonists: being able to detach themselves from aspects of their culture that restrict them. Indeed, both the nameless narrator and Nazneen evolve in a multicultural environment in which families’ expectations may not match with society’s and therefore result in issues of belonging and identity.

This paper explores the issues and consequences that come with the experience of multiculturalism as woman and the experience of cultural hybridity. Both protagonists try to find a balance while finding their place in their community and British society and trying to keep in touch with their roots in their quest for emancipation.

Even though the protagonists seem to achieve this goal of emancipation, the reader's initial expectations are not entirely fulfilled. A few hints suggest that their lives will change for the better and that they will be able to create their identity as they wish but nothing concrete supports this idea and makes us able to affirm it. The reader is left with the wish to see the product of their emancipation and their new identity but can only speculate that it truly happened. No proof of a concrete change can be read by the reader and instead, we are offered a rise of self-consciousness and a clear personal desire.

It would therefore be interesting to go further in the analysis and analyze male characters in these two novels and to mention the effects of their presence or their absence in the narration. Therefore, we could wonder to what extent the absence of men contributes to the female characters' predominance, to their actions, and their understanding of society.

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