Chapter Six

Between Bangladesh and London: the fiction of Monica Ali and Tahmima Anam

Having studied the British diasporic groups of writers of Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan origin, this chapter is an attempt at studying the Bangladeshi diaspora and its concerns in Britain primarily through the writings of Monica Ali (1967—) and Tahmima Anam (1975—). Whereas Monica Ali is a first generation diasporic writer, with one of her parents of British origin and having moved to England at a very early age; Tahmima Anam belongs to the second generation diasporic group, who settled in UK only a few years back. But as far as their writing is concerned, both women though deeply connected with Britain still hanker after their own past association with the original homeland or association through the family stories. What comes out, therefore, is an open encounter with Bangladesh. This chapter studies the ties with their homeland, their position in their locale, whether Britain or Bangladesh, their present status and their future aspirations as revealed through their writing. Like the earlier chapters, this one is also divided into three sections. Whereas the first section deals with general observations of the uniqueness of the Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain, the other two sections offer more in-depth study of the two novelists selected as case studies.

I. Bangladesh and the Overseas Bangladeshi diaspora

The story of migrating Bangladeshis to different parts of the globe is no new phenomenon. Bangladeshis have moved to the Middle East and different other countries from almost all over Bangladesh. However the striking phenomenon that needs to be observed is that the
British community of Bangladeshi origin is mostly from one particular region of erstwhile East Pakistan, namely Sylhet, located in the North East of the present Bangladesh. The Sylhetis have transmigrated to Britain as early as the 1920s and 1930s, when the country was a part of (East) Pakistan. This phenomenon remained unabated even in the 1950s and 1960s. The migration was further enhanced during the 1970s, when the liberation was commenced in the country.

After independence and establishment of Bangladesh as a free nation state, the 1970s saw an alteration in the mode of migration and the craze for gaining passport, as the British government grew more and more sensitive on immigrant issues. The Bangladeshis migrated in large numbers from particular areas or districts of the country showing a unique phenomenon of chain migration. After the 1970s the man of the house, earning in foreign land to make life for the family back home prosperous, was changed to situations where entire families shifted, evacuating several districts. Apart from improving the financial status of the relatives back home, this move affected the economy of the country. Dr David Garbin observes, “In 1995 a report indicated that 20% of the Bangladeshi families in East London were sending money to Bangladesh, whereas during the 1960s and 1970s approximately 85% were remitting their savings” (Garbin). As per the statistics provided by Wikipedia, regarding the settlement of Bangladeshis in Britain:

The largest concentration is in London, primarily in the East London boroughs, of which Tower Hamlets has the highest proportion, making up approximately 33% of the boroughs total population… Bangladeshis also have significant communities in Birmingham, Oldham, Luton and Bradford, with smaller clusters in Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cardiff and Sunderland… According to the national 2001 census figures, and the Office for National Statistics 2006 figures, there are around 300,000 Bangladeshis living in the United Kingdom (“British Bangladeshis”).
This migration had begun as a result of the job opportunities created in Britain by the shipping companies. The odd jobs on the ship floor were done by these men who later shifted to catering business as situations and needs changed drastically.

As a young nation, Bangladesh has not produced so many creative voices in the diaspora as India and Pakistan have. One of the reasons for this vacuum might be the average socio-economic condition of most of the immigrants in Britain. An interesting fact to note regarding the writers of Bangladeshi origin settled in Britain is that they are mostly women. Apart from Monica Ali and Tahmima Anam, recognized as the most popular authors of Bangladeshi origin; another author of recent recognition is Shazia Omar who is presently located in Bangladesh. Her debut novel, *Like a Diamond in the Sky* (1997), deals with social problems as drugs, disease, trauma and despair wrenching the life of a twenty-one year old Deen, making a criminal out of a bundle of positive passions. Niaz Zaman and Firdous Azim’s compilation of short stories *Galpa: Short Stories by Women from Bangladesh* published in 2006 is another significant work. In spite of the presence of such promising voices it must be noted that there is dearth of creative authors of Bangladeshi origin in Britain and the number of fiction writers is lesser still.

Both Monica Ali (1967—) and Tahmima Anam (1975—) have created sensation in the world with their books. Their novels are taken as worthy accounts of the Bangladeshi diaspora and the Bangladeshi people back home. The characters that pervade the corpus of their fiction are real life evidences of struggle, of the Bangladeshi people both at home and/or in the diaspora. The novelists project their characters with ardent vision of a Bangladeshi; however their experience is tainted by their diasporic identity, they being British citizens, and their sense of being the second sex.
Monica Ali, a British writer of Bangladeshi origin, catapulted into fame when her debut novel *Brick Lane* (2003) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction. Born in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1967, to a Bangladeshi father (originally from the district of Mymensingh), and an English mother, the family moved to Bolton, England, when she was three years old and where she was raised. She had studied at Oxford University and lives in London. She was named in 2003 by *Granta* magazine as one of twenty ‘Best of Young British Novelists.’ Her second novel, *Alentejo Blue*, set in Portugal, was published in 2006. Her latest novel is *In the Kitchen* (2009).

Tahmima Anam, a Bangladeshi writer and novelist, was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1975, and grew up in Paris, New York City, and Bangkok, due to her father’s work with the UNICEF. Her first novel, *A Golden Age*, was published in 2007 and was the Best First Book winner of the 2008 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize. Her second novel to be published in April, 2011 is *The Good Muslim: A Novel*. Trained as an anthropologist, with a PhD from Harvard University, USA, she also completed an MA in Creative Writing from the University of London in 2005. She presently lives in West Hampsted, London. Anam comes from an illustrious literary family in Bangladesh. Her father Mahfuz Anam is the editor and publisher of Bangladesh’s most prominent English newspaper *The Daily Star*. Her grandfather Abul Mansur Ahmed was a renowned satirist and politician whose works in Bengali remain popular to this day.

II. Monica Ali’s Search for Space amid Homeland and Hostland

Monica Ali had spent the early days of her childhood in Bangladesh and during the outbreak of war in 1971 had to flee her motherland and homeland of her father. They shifted to Britain; the land of her mother, for it was easier to seek citizenship. Her debut novel, *Brick Lane* is a
brave delineation of the diasporic angst, seen through the eyes of Nazneen, a Muslim woman put into an unattractive marriage with Chanu, a not-much educated Bangladeshi, much elder to her. She tries hard to love her husband and though succeeds to a certain extent is not very confident of her love. After their marriage the couple shifts to England, and settles there. After the death of the first child, which happens to be a baby boy, they live with their two daughters and a congealed pain of loss. Ali plumbs the life of the Bangladeshi community that has immigrated to Bangladesh, mostly Sylhetis (though it must be taken into account that Nazneen and her husband Chanu do not belong to that district), and the struggle they take up along with their folk against a new culture, alien language and people. Though the novel is not the first about the Bangladeshi community who live in East London, Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* is unique as it is written by a woman, and the focus is almost exclusively on the lives of Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlet, the eastern suburb of London.

As the story goes, Nazneen fails to adjust herself to her surrounding from the time of her arrival. She sticks to her ghetto and the people of her community. Mrs Azad, Razia and the host of Bangladeshi women remarkably present the varied stance taken up by the diasporic Bangladeshi women. Nazneen remains in her cocoon and aligns herself with her family and daughters. Like most middle class Bangladeshi married Muslim women, she has very little to say in matters of the family. She hardly possesses the right or even the potency to comment on the ambience or show resentment regarding her stay in an alien place. In her grim situation she longs to meet her sister back in Bangladesh. This brings fresh memories of a land forgotten and a host of childhood dreams left unfulfilled. However she gradually acculturates and ultimately decides to stay back in England with her daughters while her husband Chanu quits the hostland for Bangladesh.
Ali’s second novel *Alentejo Blue* (2006) is a loosely interwoven collection of stories set in and around a Portuguese village. Set amid cork oak forest in Southern Portugal the stories bear no near or far resemblance to *Brick Lane*. The stories are seen from the points of view of different inhabitants of or visitors to the region: an ancient, gay pig farmer; a fat, dimwitted cafe owner; a poor, scatty Englishwoman and her slovenly family; an alcoholic English writer; a local girl and so on. The novel takes twists and turns through the cul-de-sacs and alleys of this confined region, as also through the simple lives of the people. Ali’s work shows a conscious swerve from diasporic sentiment. This work reveals the greater concerns of a writer in keeping track of the simple human feelings as against charting out the turmoils and disturbances of a life, of a people trapped in a strait.

Ali’s third novel *In the Kitchen* (2009) comes close to the spirit of the first novel, though different in its not having to deal with the diasporic sentiment. On the contrary, the tone and spirit taste of cosmopolitanism. Set in a multicuisine hotel which promises food from over the continents, and harbours chefs of different nationalities, the novel is also an accumulation of different incidents. Murders, disturbing family secrets, the conspiracy of it all create a strange feeling of unrest. It evokes eerie feeling in the discovery of the dead body of a night porter in the basement and the unravelling of hidden mysteries buried within the hotel. However amidst the special effects created, what lie at the core are the known issues of identity, nationality, and belonging and not, family and the mutating lives of London’s migrant workers. The protagonist Gabriel Lightfoot, the Imperial’s executive chef intent upon opening a restaurant of his own, suddenly alters from the dreaming aspiring self that he is, to a state, “unsure if he was awake or asleep, unable to distinguish between reality and dream: a barking dog, a sob, an owl screech, a looming human shape, a crushing weight on his legs, tiny creatures scratching his face” (Ali, *In the Kitchen* 395). In this novel Ali deftly turns the crisis, the
nostalgia, the fascination in the human heart, and inside the hotel to capture the wider repercussions in the heart of multicultural London. While some diasporic authors as A. Sivanandan have based their works in their countries of origin, others like Kureishi base their works mostly in the hostland. However writers like Monica Ali’s interest lies in transnational issues and especially in matters relating to cultural pluralism in a cosmopolitan setting.

*Brick Lane* is named after the street in the heart of London’s Bangladeshi community.

Controversies arose when an attempt to film the novel met with a protest by the residents for whom the novel had made them appear uneducated and unsophisticated. The greatest protest came up when Ruby Films opted to shoot the film in the particular area of Brick Lane. The campaign was allegedly supported by Germaine Greer, who has written:

As British people know little and care less about the Bangladeshi people in their midst, their first appearance as characters in an English novel had the force of a defining caricature ... [S]ome of the Sylhetis of *Brick Lane* did not recognize themselves. Bengali Muslims smart under an Islamic prejudice that they are irreligious and disorderly, the impure among the pure, and here was a proto-Bengali writer with a Muslim name, portraying them as all of that and more” (Lewis).

As the film *Brick Lane* directed by Sarah Gavron begins, the voice remembers the protagonist’s alienation in London:

> You can spread your soul over a paddy field, you can feel the earth beneath your toes, and know that this is the place, the place where it begins and ends. But what can you tell to a pile of bricks? I think of my sister, I think of home. My husband promises me we will be coming home soon (*Brick Lane*).

The text too begins in a similar vacillation, as Nazneen the first generation diasporic subject from Bangladesh undergoes the crisis of her life as she steps amidst alien people in Britain. Life in Brick Lane suffocates her sense of being unless she realizes her self and identity. Nazneen belongs to the group of diasporic women who experience the “double bind” as they
are “treated as alien by their host nation and as commodities by the men of their own communities” (Cormack 700). These uprisng Muslim women writers project the experiences of the men as much different from the women. To cite Nazneen’s case in Brick Lane, or the case of other Muslim women, they had travelled a long distance and had been at a very great unease both inward and outward. The people of England and the place itself is nothing more than a death-trap to them. But once the initial shock is over they find in their locale a space for freedom, an open space where they can do anything and are capable of going anywhere. Where in Bangladesh a woman is merely an ineffectual, an inanimate object in the house or sometimes a show-piece, here she turns out to be the most functional device of the family. The father is no longer the much feared, awed or respected person in the house. He is on the contrary the cause of boredom for the children who tend to find him obfuscating. He is too obdurate, even when in the homeland, but in a new land he is emasculated. The mother is compromising as ever, can take her children’s mistakes for granted, and seems a close companion to them. She understands the children and their perspectives. Through her children and their process of acculturation, she too steadily gets into this acculturation process. The mother moves closer to the new land through her children, and even tries and makes considerable move towards understanding this new land and its people for the sole sake of her offspring. The father with his urge to keep his position intact moves away further from his children. His alienation is thus manifold. First, it is the alienation common to every diasporic individual, second is the alienation he faces from his children, and finally the alienation he finds in his wife deviating from him.

Chanu the husband in Brick Lane is so bent on not changing and sticking to his outlook of the nation (Britain) being the seat of corruption that he has to return to Bangladesh. Nazneen who had ever longed to return to her Bangladesh, the nation of her dreams and longing takes the
side of her daughters and decides to stay back. Her husband had come to Britain, while she had longed to stay back in Bangladesh, but the situation reverses completely with the passage of time and she perceives the real meaning of the English saying, “you cannot cross the same river twice.” Clifford’s observation of the diasporic women’s plight can be easily applied to Nazneen’s case:

Life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful—struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies. Despite these hardships, they may refuse the option of return when it presents itself, especially when the terms are dictated by men (Clifford 314).

As Nazneen arrives in London it is Chanu who tutors her about the new world and how she should consider the people of the West. The new world before Nazneen filters through Chanu’s sensibilities as he remarks, “All the time they (the British) are polite. They smile. They say ‘please’ this and ‘thank you’ that. Make no mistake about it, they shake your hand with the right, and with the left they stab you in the back” (Ali, Brick Lane 58). But by the end of the novel it becomes evident that Nazneen can form her own opinion.

When the story begins, Nazneen is an eighteen year old bride who is framed into a compliment by her husband, “She is an unspoilt girl. From the village.” (Ali, Brick Lane 16). Nazneen constantly suffers from a deep longing to go back to her place of origin. In the meantime she ventures on her mental journey to regain her self. Her initiation process begins through her encounter with the new land, and through the influence of several people, and a going back to the past land through her sister’s letters. Nazneen’s sister, who had fled home to make a life of her own; the daughters who tread far beyond their Bangladeshi identity and form an alignment with the West; Razia, who breathes feminist zeal into Nazneen and most importantly London itself, a living presence and an existence that gives her a safe passage, conspire together to transform Nazneen to a cosmopolitan being.
Through a complex nexus formed by the different experiences of women and their perceiving of one another’s position and status Ali forms an impenetrable web of perceptions in the novel. Nazneen is placed in the midst of every opinion—whether her husband, who defies assimilation; her daughters who are totally assimilated into the present land; Razia struggling for a place in this new land; sister Hasina fleeing the grips of patriarchy in the homeland or Mrs Islam threatening every attempt at escape from the taboos of the community with her man-like hands. Nazneen observes, that her sister Hasina, though at home and not at exile as her, is also trapped in an exilic state—”A woman on her own in the city, without a husband, without family, without friends, without protection,” (46). Through such dichotomy between Nazneen and her sister Hasina, Ali subtly questions the notion of homeland and security. Hasina is vulnerable, alienated and at exile even in her native place; she is an outcast and has none to resort to. Nazneen on the contrary is at home in London. She finds a Bangladesh always clinging to her in her husband’s deep love for the country, the people of the community with Dr Azad and Mrs Islam, and in her British-born Bangladeshi lover, Karim. Moreover as she reads the letters sent by her sister and re-lives her (sister’s) life, the plight and sordidness of her existence, Nazneen is weaned out of her feeling for the motherland.

Her final encounter with the self occurs when she realizes that Karim is devoid of an identity, being of neither the hostland nor the homeland. Being a second generation diasporic individual he has no history, no past to go back to, no native land. Unlike her, he is not sure of his country or of a motherland. She realizes that though Karim pretends to take her to her self, it is he who suffers from identity crisis. Far from succumbing to the meanness of my land-their land, Nazneen realizes in London a freedom which she feels could have never been possible in Bangladesh. It must however be said that this perception though true of a Muslim
woman from Bangladesh, even shows the bias of a diasporic writer who ultimately realizes
Britain as her own land. Though a first generation diasporic, Ali’s migration at a very early
age had deprived her of any genuine affinity for Bangladesh, and her haven had been her
present land, Britain. Still her picturization of Nazneen is not devoid of life. The critic John
Marx writes, “Nazneen is a character who recognizes that the act of making a choice is
significant. The narrative presents her as a figure aware that even small choices can have
substantial ramifications” (Marx 19).

Through her letters Hasina forms an important part of Nazneen’s character. She influences
Nazneen’s identity to such an extent that Hasina starts growing within Nazneen. In an online
interview given to Jessica Jernigan, Ali revealed that Nazneen and Hasina came to her “as a
pair,” sisters “in pursuit of happiness” (Jernigan). They are facets of the same character, one
the alter ego of the other, the two disjointed and connected pieces of the mind through spatio-
temporal continuum. The two characters are brought in to symbolize the dual aspirations of a
single mind, being at two places at the same time. Hasina and Nazneen exchange roles as she
and her sister perform the same role of self searching, craving for identity. Here Nazneen
completes the role begun by Hasina to create a name, a place in the world. Nazneen gradually
comes out of the construct of homeland, itself a part of the male discourse. She steps out of
the collective discourse to form a discourse of her own; though to an extent, it can be said that
Ali’s characterization of Nazneen is influenced by feminist stance. Ali consciously forms
Nazneen’s identity in such a manner.

In Nazneen’s two daughters, Sahana and Bibi, Ali marks the difference in outlook of the
second generation immigrants. Unlike the first generation who are suspicious of the new land,
the second generation kids in Ali’s text are already assimilated and the very thought of going back to Bangladesh sound horrible to them. As Ali describes Sahana:

Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans. She hated her kameez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them. If she could choose between baked beans and dal it was no contest. When Bangladesh was mentioned she pulled a face. She did not know and would not learn that Tagore was more than poet and Nobel Laureate, and no less than the true father of her nation. Shahana did not care. Shahana did not want to go back home (Ali, Brick Lane 147).

Sahana and Bibi face the worst crisis of their lives as the family plans going back to the native land. The entire family is cleft into parts as the returning is pronounced. Through the different reactions to going back, Ali brings up several approaches—reaction, acceptance or feeling of oneness.

The eldest daughter Sahana and the father Chanu stand at opposite ends. They represent the two polarities in diasporic experience. While the father craves to return, the daughter is outrightly against it and stiffly protests the proposal. Nazneen the mother understands that her daughters, and especially Sahana, would never forgive her in case she forced her daughters to return to Bangladesh. The very word ‘returning’ would seem uncanny to them for they had no notion of Bangladesh as their home, or even as their place of origin. Sahana is born and bred in London and has no compunction at least at her age, regarding her place or identity. Bibi, the younger daughter, is too young to perceive the dichotomies of homeland and foreign land. But when her elder sister tells her that she would have no toilet paper and would have to roll water down her bottom, it makes her shudder. More importantly for the child the change in habits was enough to scare her away from Bangladesh. The second generation further comes up in the portraiture of Dr Azad’s daughter as chewing gum, wearing short skirt, and speaking in the parents’ face for money to visit the pubs. This comes as an anathema to the native
Bangladeshi consciousness upheld by Chanu, but on the other hand boldly accepted by Mrs Azad, the acculturated diasporic.

In her novel Ali gives different narratives to the man and the woman. For the male it is, as Chanu confirms, “the tragedy of our lives. To be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy… The clash of cultures… And of generations.” He emphasizes the deeper tragedy of an immigrants’ life:

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… (Ali, Brick Lane 92).

However Ali doesn’t stop here and provides a dampener to the male ego and the grand narratives of fixed heritage or identity, as Mrs Azad provides her counter version:

Why do you make it so complicated? …Assimilation this, alienation that! Let me tell you a few simple facts. Fact: we live in a Western society. Fact: our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact: that’s no bad thing. When I’m in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work. I work with white girls and I’m just one of them. They go around covered from head to toe, in their little walking prisons, and when someone calls to them in the street they are upset. The society is racist. The society is all wrong. Everything should change for them. They don’t have to change one thing. That…is the tragedy” (Ali, Brick Lane 93).

Ali shows how the woman enters the acculturation process while the man with his strict perimeters and rigid codes of behaviour fails to adjust and proves defeated in his binding to return. The new land has given the woman the scope for an occupation; had made her potent enough to run the family even if it is only the basic amenities, and above all has given her the power to overpower the man.
Whether in Chanu, the husband, or Karim the lover, Ali projects the impotent male, the fragmented soul, the unaccommodating self. Far from Chanu who had failed to adjust in London as well as Karim who though coveted Bangladesh had only second-hand notions of the same and were sure to be a misfit in the land, Nazneen is the one who is the perfect adapter. In the characters of these Muslim women as Nazneen, Razia and Mrs Azad, Ali even creates an alternative to the diasporic discourse which states specific rules of conduct for the first and second generation group. Through these characters Ali breaks this polarity. Moreover these characters can be said to be an attempt at showing that the urge to connect and communicate can lead to a perfect assimilation.

To emphasize, in Ali’s novels the diasporic characters’ further breaking this dichotomy between the reaction of the first and second generation subjects to their hostland, one can take a look at her oeuvre. While Suleiman, the first generation chef from India in In the Kitchen speaks better English than the native and does not totter in his identity; Karim, the second generation diasporic in Brick Lane, has no steady notion of identity, as he fails to align to any of the lands, homeland or hostland. While speaking of Suleiman, the chef from India, in In the Kitchen, the anonymous narrator mentions, “Suleiman was from India. He had spent less than three years in England but already his English was better than Oona’s (a native)” (Ali, In the Kitchen 20), while hinting at his steady acculturation. Karim, Nazneen’s lover, is an activist and works for the fundamentalist organization for the betterment of the people of Bangladesh. He feigns standing for the preservation and sustenance of the Bangladeshi culture. But as Nazneen realizes, he has no place of his own. He fights for Bangladesh, the language Bangla, but stammers while speaking the language. He speaks of Bangladesh as his land but has never been there. It seems interesting to Nazneen and all the more pathetic that this man has no language of his own. Karim’s concern for indigenous people centres on the craving to cling to
a culture which he may call his own. Nazneen understands Karim’s need to attach to her is only to get a notion of his self— “She was his real thing. A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of himself that he found in her” (380). She finds that like her mother who had been something like a superwoman, a saint-like figure, she too stands taller than the male characters, in spite of their (the male’s) domination. The men relegate to the background as Nazneen takes the centre ground. It is she who resolves the bias of identity and gets over the dichotomy of culture and language.

The importance of language in assimilation and the formation of an identity forms one of the major presumptions of Ali. Monica Ali is of mixed parentage with a Bengali father and an English mother. Ali and her brother lived like several other middle-class Bengali children. The children spoke only Bengali. The political disturbance caused by the break up of East Pakistan from West Pakistan and the formation of People’s Republic of Bangladesh, caused the temporary break-up of the family as the mother along with the children emigrated to England, while the father stayed back in Bangladesh to join later. Ali recalls, “The anxious mother stuffed her children’s mouths with boiled sweets to prevent them from speaking; the trick worked” (qtd. Haq 21). Thus their original language Bengali was taken away from them and a new language, the language of the new land was given to them. The burning of the mouth and this giving of a new language is very much an initiation, something like a rite of passage ceremony. As Monica Ali reminiscences of her early life in “Where I’m Coming From” (2003):

My father escaped from East Pakistan, over the border to India. From there he finally got permission to join his wife in the UK. It was a temporary situation. When things got sorted out, we would go back. His children settled into school, we stopped speaking to him in Bengali and then we stopped even understanding. The new status quo was accepted. There was no plan, after that, to “go home”. Sounding philosophical, my father would say: “I just got stuck here, that’s all.” And home, because it could never be reached, became
mythical: Tagore’s golden Bengal, a teasing counterpoint to our drab northern mill town lives (qtd. Haq 21).

Just the reverse of this is shown in the life of Nazneen. The English language that had remained alien to Nazneen becomes her own towards the end of the novel, as she plumbs the meaning of the English saying, “you can’t step into the same river twice” (Ali, Brick 409). The communication gap ceases as Nazneen’s entire body swirls to the screeching English voice and she sings in unison with the English singer, “Shout”. As Stephanie Zacharek writes in the review of Ali’s Brick Lane, ‘Ironically, Nanzeen is reborn in London, but her rebirth occurs against her own insistence on the supremacy of fate. At thirty-four, she is suddenly “startled by her own agency like an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye”’ (Zacharek).

Stressing the difficulty of speaking in English, Chanu had assured his wife, “But you are unlikely to need these words in any case” (Ali, Brick 28). But the new land had altered things. Though the female voice begins as, “If you say so husband” (Ali, Brick 81), condescending to each and every proposal of the man, soon she would utter her unspoken thoughts, “She meant to say something else by it: sometimes that she disagreed, sometimes that she didn’t understand or that he was talking rubbish, sometimes that he was mad” (ibid). This is also a way of protesting against the European orientalist discourse which considers Asian women as ‘passive.’ Ali projects Nazneen as a live protest, as if to say in Avtar Brah’s words, “my aim is to address the many and different ways in which women of Asian origin in Britain are actively setting their own agendas, challenging their specific oppressions in their own ways, and marking new cultural and political trajectories” (Brah 69). Nazneen’s “death rattle” (9) as a child at the beginning, is symbolic of her first attempt at keeping a stronghold on life through language.
The diasporic authors explore the power of the word in creating a home and framing an identity and Ali is no exception. This is symbolically portrayed as Nazneen notices a waitress holding a pen: “Between her thumb and forefinger, she rolled the pen round and round. She spoke to a customer. The pen kept rolling” (380). This image of perfect poise, the control in a female hand comes up as another powerful symbol. Moreover in the rolling of the pen, a writer’s weapon; English words, that is, language-expression-art in its numerous manifestations come at the disposal of the naïve Bangladeshi girl. The image can be in a way of a novelist or the self-image of Ali, where she envisions power within herself. It can also be a satisfaction at the rumination that it could have been possible only because it was England. Nazneen sits down to write. However she had to surrender for the time being for it was not working. Yet she does not lose hope. “She had thought it would be a matter of trying. Now she realized that the work would come later. First she had to imagine” (Ali, Brick 409). As the critic Ruvani Ranasinha states, “Ali’s unadorned, moving portrait of her young Muslim female protagonist Nazneen’s gradual transformation from self-abnegation to self-possession is very popular amongst young Asian women, and has won warm praise from artists Shazia Mirza and Syal” (Ranasinha 262).

Unlike most diasporic authors who can never get out of the vacillation to choose from two or more lands, Ali takes a confirmed stance at the end of her Brick Lane. Her work is too bold in its finding a total release from the trap, from in-betweenness and from the dichotomy of homeland and hostland. Towards the end of the novel Razia and Nazneen’s daughters bring Nazneen blindfolded to the skating ground. This gliding through the mountain peak on skates was something that was unthought-of in the case of these women in Bangladesh. As she had arrived and settled in London she had watched with fancy the skater on a magazine.
Nazneen’s dream could materialize only because of her stay in the foreign land. This idea is rightly observed by Poornima Apte when she states: “Ali has created a powerful testament to the liberating yet terrifying power of possibility. ‘This is England, anything is possible,’ says a character at the end of the book” (Apte).

Another important feature of Ali’s novel is that though set in London it speaks more and more of Bangladesh and the Bangladeshi ghetto in Britain. But her delineation of the homeland is partial. She brings in news of home to state the brutalities of a land discarded. The father or the lovers of Hasina, are inhuman and domination on the female race is rampant. From the very beginning her life is an emblem of the death struggle of the women who at every instance face their ill fate in the confined society of the homeland in Bangladesh. Rupban, Nazneen’s mother, wishes she had killed her daughters. Ali’s representation of the Bangladeshi community is politicized for they are projected just as the native British with colonial hangover would relish. Chanu narrates the condition of the Bangladeshi ghetto and sums up the status of the Bangladeshi people arriving in Britain:

...most of the people are Sylhetis. They all stick together because they come from the same district. They know each other from the villages, and they come to Tower Hamlets and they think they are back in the village. Most of them have jumped ship. That’s how they come. They have menial jobs on the ship, doing donkey work, or they stow away like rats in the hold...And when they jump ship and scuttle over here, then in a sense they are home again. And you see, to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan. But these people are peasants. Uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition (Ali, Brick Lane 21).

This description serves the purpose of stating the bias of a Bangladeshi immigrant from the district of Mymensingh for the Sylhetis. Moreover Chanu’s version speaks eons on diasporic sentiments, the condition of those surviving on menial jobs in the foreign land. The need and the process of formation of the ghetto, and of the attitude the British whites meted towards the
natives from the Indian subcontinent, also becomes evident in this acerbic comment. However in Chanu’s description Ali makes a clear indication at the inferior status of the Bangladeshi people. The fictionality of fiction apart, in the light of New Historicism’s craze for textuality of history and historicity of texts, Ali certainly has to bear the blame.

Ali’s characters are highly stereotyped. Nazneen recreates the stereotypical projection of a woman in sari with her shy gestures, shirking the company of the outer world and in her sewing. She is projected as a South Asian stereotype, but her plan to discard the sari for convenient attire suggests an end to stereotyping. However we also encounter women as Mrs Islam, who do not wear burkha but “keep purdah in (the) mind”; (Ali, *Brick Lane* 22) and Jorina, a diasporic woman in the conclave who has to commit suicide. The simple analysis revealed is that one can make a space for herself only when she assimilates with the British culture, and can make her own life only when in London. Hasina, the individualist fails, for she is in Bangladesh. Though she strives, her life remains fruitless. Nazneen’s dreams get fulfilment because she lives in England. The utopian notion of Britain stands confirmed in Razia’s boasting words— “This is England... You can do whatever you like” (Ali 413). These ideas certainly smack of a politics which the hybrid, or more so the British author takes up to state that her position is what is best and coveted. Ali actually follows the British racist attitude of not letting the South Asians, and especially the Muslims, from entering into the mainstream, until and unless they change their cultural markers. Ali is satisfied for nothing less than complete assimilation, where every speck of Bangladesh needs to be done away with. All the emblems of Bangladesh prove futile in the end. Monica Ali subtly stands by the British/ colonizer’s claim that they had colonized to liberate the oppressed, and the novel, to an extent continues with the colonization of the mind.
This colonization is further expressed in the manner in which Ali projects England as a utopia over and over again. Wedded off to a far off land, Hasina writes to her sister in London, “You remember those story [sic] we hear as children begin like this. ‘Once there was prince who lived in far off land seven seas and thirteen rivers away.’ That is how I think of you. But as princess” (Ali 19). This clearly suggests that travel to England is travel to an idyllic dream-home, not to an exile. The distinction between the gendered groups in the novel is purposeful in showing the two different approaches towards the West— that of entering into or retarding the assimilation process. However what appears curious is that the romanticizing of the motherland is upheld primarily by the male group, while the women seeking freedom away from the motherland, move more freely in the prior colonizer’s land. As the woman grows, the man diminishes. The new land had caused the man’s ruin while the woman stands steadfast. The death of Razia’s husband causes her more relief than pain, “I can get that job now. No slaughter man to slaughter me now” (Ali, Brick 114). Kaisar Haq reiterates this point of view when he states— “it reveals a significant fact about expatriate Bangladeshis: the men dream of returning but not the women, who, even as second-class citizens, enjoy rights denied them in the mother country” (Haq 23). Such a projection also emphasizes the gender divisions and increases the rift between the genders to the profit of Britain and British ideals. Every male is discarded, and Mrs Azad is detested for she too has “man-size hands. She wore black lace-up shoes, wide and thick-soled. It was the sari that looked strange on her” (20). In this regard Brah’s quoting Liddle and Joshi regarding the politics of representation is worth noting, “the British were not interested in women’s position for its own sake, but in the way that gender divisions mediated the structure of imperialism” (qtd. Brah 74).

In Ali’s world, power rests in women. The son Raqib whom Chanu had decided to take back home not wishing him to grow up amid “skinheads and drunks,” fails to survive (Ali, Brick
91). But as earlier Nazneen had survived against Fate, similarly the daughters survive in this new world. They contribute to the mother’s soul and add on to her dreams. Here the Muslim women contradict that part of British discourse which sees them as inactive, confined to their families and as superstitious. Avtar Brah finds the futility of straitjacketing Muslim women in one frame, for she marks a clear distinction between, “‘Muslim woman’ as a discursive category of ‘representation’ and Muslim women as embodied, situated, historical subjects with varying and diverse personal or collective biographies and social orientations” (Brah 131).

However it must be said that Ali’s delineation is too unidimensional and proceeds through a series of vacillations to a steady getting over from the turmoils. Though unlike women writers like Meera Syal who are purely South-Asian in origin, Ali is born of mixed-parentage, yet like Syal she too is pitted in the worst enigma, that of representing the community. Ranasinha observes, “As…with Kureishi, the reception of mixed-race Monica Ali’s novel appears to fall into similar polarities of ‘Tell us about them’ and ‘What gives you the right to write about us?’” (Ranasinha 261), and it must be said, that Ali’s representation is nonetheless coloured.

Moreover Ali’s work falls to a technical lapse which is quite common with diasporic writers, even when they feign a true version of their native place. While Nazneen is trapped in the Bangladeshi ghetto in Britain, she receives news of her homeland in her sister Hasina’s letters, who ironically had fled home. Hasina’s letters proved a great problem for Ali. She had long forsaken Bangladesh and her loved-language Bengali was no longer hers. Naturally when she took to translating the supposed letters written by Hasina, a less educated lady writing imperfect Bengali, she affected strange English which was quite incoherent. Hasina’s letters have often been found unconvincing by the readers. Her letters are written in pidgin
English while the idioms are often stumbling. In the novel Bengali words are spelt in English and Bengali metaphors are verbally translated into English as “seven seas and thirteen rivers away” (Ali, *Brick* 19), “local yogi doesn’t get alms” (Ali, *Brick* 90), etc. making the sense complicated and difficult to grasp. Often lacking first hand knowledge of land of her origin, it is difficult for Ali to comprehend her original homeland. Like in the other diasporic writers, the description of her homeland is mainly what she collects from her parents and relatives, from photographs, videos, and from television, internet, etc. Their perception is thus second hand and their delineation partially correct. Ali’s projection of the Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain brings in a politicized projection of the diaspora. The target readers for Ali seem to be the large portion of the White British community as well, apart from the people in the diaspora and also the South Asians back home intent upon collecting news of the people who have migrated to the West.

Ali belongs to that tradition of diasporic writers who step out of the beaten track of diasporic novels dealing with the angst of homelessness and duality of identity after their debut effort at projecting their crisis. Ali’s second novel *Alentejo Blue* as mentioned earlier deals with the simple life in a village in Southern Portugal and treats the experiences of people of various professions and belonging to different strata of life. The third novel *In the Kitchen* is set in a multicuisine hotel in London where people from different corners of the world with their diverse tastes meet. The novel is cosmopolitan in setting, and unlike *Brick Lane* keeps away from intricate thoughts on diaspora or Bangladeshi diasporic community in Britain. Till her third novel it becomes quite evident that Ali’s concerns do not remain tied to the angst of home-homelessness but she has got over the same. However any final conclusion on the trend of Monica Ali’s writing remains deferred till the publication of her later novels.
III. Consciousness of Home and Homeland in Tahmima Anam’s fiction

Like most diasporic author’s first novels which concentrate on the homeland, Tahmima Anam (1975—), plumbs deep into her homeland Bangladesh and its people in her debut novel. Her novel, *A Golden Age* (2007), centres on the struggle of the Bangladeshi people, spurred by Pakistan’s brutality and politicking against the East Pakistanis. The story of deprivation and bloodshed comes to the fore in the empathy of an insider with hardly any intrusion of the outer world. Anam comes out as a native writer more than a diasporic writer. However the faulty factual details at times reveals the gaps of a diasporic writer, for her observations come as second hand experiences. As Lynn Neary writes in the article in the *Morning Edition*, January 11, 2008:

> The child of a diplomat, Tahmima Anam grew up far away from her native Bangladesh. But all her life, she heard about that country’s war for independence — which took place before she was born — from her Bengali parents and their friends. And when she decided to write a novel about Bangladesh, Anam says, she couldn’t imagine writing about anything else except the war (Neary).

Anam’s proposed second novel *The Good Muslim: A Novel* takes the incidents through the Bangladesh society during the days of its formation of ethos. The novel traces the clash between the orthodoxies of religion and the secular. This second volume to the trilogy would probably reach its conclusion in *Salt of the Earth*, her proposed third novel depicting the catastrophic effects of climate change. To be published in April 2011, the previews confirm the theme of the text as one dealing with Islamic fundamentalism seen realized in the simple life of the members of a family. As Kamila Shamsie comments on the work:

> What happens to a heart ravaged by war? What happens to the strongest bonds of familial love when a son or a brother walks down a path that seems incomprehensible? In this book of searing beauty, Tahmima Anam shows us a family searching for ways to navigate through these questions; in the process
she takes us on an unforgettable journey through a young nation trying to define itself ("The Good Muslim").

*A Golden Age* is inspired by the real life experience of Anam’s grandmother, whose eldest son had been a part of Bangladesh’s struggle for independence. Modelled on her grandmother as Anam confesses in an interview at the *Youtube*, the protagonist Rehana too sheltered the persecuted and the warriors of the Bangladeshi freedom struggle against the Pakistani army.

The two children of the widow, Rehana—Maya and Sohail in their engagement with the war which was to become the greatest event in national history, involve their mother. The mother takes part in the same through her emotional involvement, by providing her shelter for hiding weapons and the freedom fighter. The other characters as Senguptas, Haque, and the compatriots in the war all mingle to form a texture which is steeped in the Bangladeshi spirit.

Through the experience of Mukti juddho in which Urdu becomes the enemy’s language, Rehana traces her alienation whereby originally Urdu speaking, she becomes at once the participant in the war and the enemy.

As the story begins, Rehana Haque, a young Muslim bride, after the death of her husband, fights with her childless brother and sister-in-law for the custody of her children. Born in Calcutta and married in Karachi in erstwhile East Pakistan, Rehana faces identity crisis which begins as these children release themselves of family ties and seek a greater cause in the struggle for the making of a nation. Rehana’s life grows void as her children yield to the charisma of Sheikh Mujib. They in no time forget the struggle that Rehana had put up to bring her children back. However she faces the worst crisis of her life as she has to quit her home “Shona” and quit the land though she had lost everything including her children for the freedom of the land. Above all though she thinks she was returning to her own land, her land
of birth, Calcutta (India), the land does not accept her as its own. Instead she is dumped in the Refugee Camps with the ill-fated tag “Joy Bangla.”

However though Tahmima Anam brings in a host of details about her homeland, these are at times brought in to satisfy the tastes of the inquisitive readers of the West. She brings in numerous references to show her awareness which are but mostly faulty. As Somdatta Mandal in her review of *A Golden Age* writes, at length:

> Like most subcontinental writers in English, Anam instills the right amount of exotica and Bengali words into her writing to make everything seem very authentic. Characters therefore use the *gamcha*, eat *jao-bhaat* or *morog polao*, move *tara tari*, *salaamed* and *nomoskared* each other, move with their *jeeneesh-patro* and *grass-green tikitiks*. So much so good but when she describes Rehana sprinkling a few *bokul* seeds around her husband’s grave and “a few weeks later tiny white *bokul* flowers appeared, casting themselves resolutely upwards”; when someone covers her head with The Statesman; or when she mentions the visit from 8 Theatre Road to the refugee camps at Salt Lake and the route takes her across Howrah Bridge, driving into the wilderness by “leaving the perimeter of Calcutta” with barren landscape and “yellow with fields of dying hay”, you can either call it poetic license, gross negligence, or the ignorance of the British editor... (Mandal).

The novel has gone through the expert fire of several critics, who claim that it negates every attempt at authenticity. Being a diasporic writer living in Britain, Anam loses the fervour that can be expected only of a resident writer. Whether authenticity is sought in historical facts, the delineation of the lives, or in the places and names of streets and even in the flow of language, everywhere is a break from reality. This remains an important characteristic of diasporic writers for while relating to the homeland though they are exuberant, the reality is tainted by imagination. The impact at times is that of artificiality and fake theatricality.

However this charge of violating authenticity hurled at diasporic authors is confronted by the Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie. In an article titled “Broken Verses, Woven Ideas,” written
on Kamila Shamsie, Shobhana Bhattacharji quotes Kamila’s views on the expatriate versus resident writer question:

Authenticity...is fraught with problems. We come from a part of the world that has been written about inaccurately for a very long time, and we need to correct that. But a novel must follow its own internal rules set by the writer. The novel creates an illusion and readers don’t want that to be broken (Bhattacharji).

Thus according to Shamsie “[a]ny novel set in the past destroys questions of authenticity because you haven’t been in the past”. However in this context it can be said that the common features of the place, the names of places, sites, scenes, erroneous quoting from exotica all hurt the feelings especially of the natives who undoubtedly seek a pseudo-reality even in the fiction. This problem is further stirred by the publishing houses that prefer sensational cover jackets to authentic ones. Tahmima Anam recalled how one of her publishers had homed in on a jacket with a woman in a pink sari… for a book where the protagonist was a widow who only wore white. “When I pointed this out to them, they said, Don’t be so literal!” (“Festival Notes 2…).

In spite of being a diasporic writer, Anam does not focus on diasporic sensibility, she nonetheless sticks to the popular concern of diasporic writers as home-homeland; one’s own nation and enemy nation, the mother-motherland, alienation in a foreign land and language, as well as propagandist stating of a country’s ethos and a people’s ethics. A Golden Age speaks not a bit of diasporic life nor does it portray its angst. Instead Anam traces the most disturbing period in the history of Bangladesh. Still the rupture in the lives created by the Bangladesh’s war of Independence — the struggle, the mass killing, the mayhem, the disruption in the lives of the Bangladeshis, the shift these people underwent can be seen as a parallel of the diasporic shift. The displacement in the lives even when in the homeland, evokes the notion that displacement is a part of everybody’s life, whether in one’s native place of origin, or outside
one’s home. Anam’s novel revolves round the mother’s sensibility and the motherland is represented in the mother. Anam as if projects that postmodern consciousness and an awareness of the surrounding would undoubtedly show a rift which is of everywhere and not a specificity of diasporic life.

Like Monica Ali in *Brick Lane*, Anam’s perspective too is from a feminist standpoint. At the outset in the novel we find that originally from Calcutta, Rehana Ali was a young woman of aristocratic family who was married off to Iqbal, much senior to her. And just after eight years, “she was, a widow, nothing to recommend her, no family near by. Her parents were dead; her three sisters lived in Karachi. That was when Faiz and Parveen (the deceased husband’s brother and sister-in-law) had offered to take the children…Parveen said, ‘Give you time to recover.’ As though it were an illness, something curable, like what was happening to the country” (Anam 7). In that spell Rehana’s life gets connected to a nation in formation and a people, shoring amid the ruins of its culture and heritage. Through the curious eye of a woman who observes the changing facets of a country and a woman’s life, Anam writes the saga of a country’s history and a mother’s memory.

As a woman writer, Anam masterfully captures a woman’s concern with the ephemeral notion of home-homeland. Once rendered stateless by her marriage, Rehana faces the rift for the second time when her children in frenzy to restore a nation’s glory, rehabilitates Bengali language, literature and culture, discarding Urdu. Rehana engrossed in “her love of Urdu, its lyrical lilts, its double meanings, its furrowed beat” (Anam 47), fails to accommodate the need of the hour of a “pure Bengali tongue” (Anam 47), or an Adaab, or Nomoshkar, the Hindu greeting. As her association with Karachi and Urdu, makes her an enemy of Bangladesh, depriving her of a home or identity, she gradually realizes that the notion of homeland is the
most puzzling enigma, just as the notion of home, like the memories of her children, “the
more she clutched at them, the more distant they became” (Anam 10).

While the characters in Ali’s fiction are discrete and diverse types, the characters in Anam’s
fiction go by the traditional notion of a Muslim woman. Ali’s fiction being set in London
enjoys the scope of projecting the characters of diverse ages, of different generations, divided
by experiences and socio-political conditions. She projects them all pitted in the same
disturbance of displacement but each reacting differently as per her condition and state of
existence. On the contrary Anam’s characters are projections of Muslim women confined to
their homes. Still these women connect to a much wider space even through their narrow
space. However, Anam makes Rehana and Maya active participators and not mere passive
interpreters. They fight their lot and work out their own victory. Though she gets up at dawn
for the Azaan, Rehana also has the guts to trespass religion in catering to floods of whisky or
in the light pleasures of playing “RUMMY” (Anam 22).

The diasporic female’s experience is much complex, diversified and surpasses the strict
parameters set by diasporic discourse, which is necessarily based on male experience. As
Toril Moi observes, the bodies of South Asian women are, “a historical sedimentation of our
way of living in the world and of the world’s way of living with us” (Moi 68). Moreover as
Evangelia Tastsoglou and Alexandra Dobrowolsky observe, “Women (im)migrants cross,
contest and reconfigure borders problematizing not only the legal and political dimensions of
citizenship, but also social, economic, and psychological ones (i.e. in terms of cultural
belonging)” (Tastsoglou, and Dobrowolsky 7). Taking into consideration such women-centric
discourse we can say that Nazneen’s assimilation is made easier by the presence of her
daughters. Like Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, the same spirit of motherhood
connects her to this new land. According to Alfonso-Forero, “Motherhood offers Ashima the occasion to assimilate in ways that she chooses, allowing her to preserve Indian traditions while moving in and out of the American mainstream at will” (Alfonso, and Forero 856).

Rehana too accommodates in the new land and culture only by dint of her motherhood and her urge to reach out to her children’s expectation of freedom, home and homeland. This characteristic can be attributed to Nazneen of Brick Lane as well. Ideology and the patriarchal constructs carve out life for these women, who in turn give to life their own constructs of motherhood.

As in Brick Lane where the women form something like a lesbian continuum, here too the women form a sisterhood among themselves. The husband is dead, the son omitted and no other male character is that significant. The army officer is more a product of her sensibility or more like a subservient character who is brought in to express herself while a “superaddresse” in the Bakhtinian sense lurks, which is her consciousness, her self. This is nothing but a gesture of perceiving her inner consciousness, for “she was afraid she wouldn’t see herself” (Anam 227). Though Rehana encounters her self, she fails to plumb her situation. Her identity remains undiagnosed as she fails to trammel her love and passion for any particular land or language as a consequence of the breaking up of nations. Like her wavering between Urdu and Bangla, Rehana wavers between Calcutta, Karachi and Bangladesh as she shifts from her native Calcutta, to her husband’s house in Bangladesh and from there back to Calcutta as a so-called refugee. Her answer at the grocer’s proposed acquaintance bares the guile, behind labelling a land as homeland, and the politics of badging one as refugee or native:

‘I’m sure I know you,’ he insisted.
‘But I don’t live here.’
‘Where are you from—are you Joy Bangla?’
‘Are you from Dhaka? Bangladesh? Joy Bangla?’
No, actually, she thought, I’m from Calcutta. But she said, ‘Yes, I’m Joy Bangla.’ (226).

As most diasporic authors are wrenched apart by the notion of own land, Anam brings in an all new and one of the most baffling concepts of the same. Rehana encounters the new land as initially conceived in the minds of a people and in the eyes of her children. Sohail unfurled a rectangular cloth of “muddy green” and “into the middle was a circle, a little uneven, in red. Inside the circle was a yellow cut-out map of East Pakistan” (48). Sohail claimed, “This is our flag, Ammoo,” (48) and Rehana wonders, “A flag without a country.” Moreover the children looked upon Sheikh Mujib as the father and the father of the nation, as if, “They belonged to him now; they were his charge, his children. They called him father. They loved him the way orphans dream of their lost parents: without promise, only hope” (Anam 49). Rehana initially fails to decipher the true spirit of the movement and the consciousness of the homeland, not existant. However she becomes one with her children in their struggle. In this context Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s comment deserves mention, “Home…not a comfortable, stable, inherited and familiar space, but instead as an imaginative, politically-charged space where the familiarity and sense of affection and commitment lay in a shared collective analysis of social injustice, as well as a vision of radical transformation” (Mohanty 353). While her children battle to raise a country, she too is battle-weary, having stretched herself beyond her strength to keep her family intact. After the forced surrender of her children Rehana offers her guest house to the Movement, allows arms to be buried in her yard.

The characters portrayed by most diasporic authors suffer from a sense of divided loyalties. This apparently nostalgic and home spun novel by the British Asian writer actually speaks at
length on the question of loyalty for the diasporics, the clash of cultures or even the angst of displacement. As Mujib’s call to “[m]ake every home a fortress” (Anam 49) incites the mob, her house “Shona” emerge a symbol of the nation. She aspires for the simple home and realizes it becoming one with the higher dreams of her children: “Sheikh Mujib would be Prime Minister, and the country would go on being her home, and the children would go on being her children. In no time at all the world would right itself and they would go on living ordinary, unexceptional lives” (Anam 50). However though Rehana originally comes from Calcutta and is connected to Karachi in West Pakistan, her loyalty for Bangladesh knows no wavering.

As the editorial reviewer in New Yorker states, “Rehana exists on the edge of things,” (Rev. of A Golden Age) but she is not torn by them. She restores her self-confidence and the confidence in her existence remains intact while fighting for Bangladesh and her people. Her concern is for her children. But she never gives up Urdu, though it is the enemy’s language. She rests satisfied at the thought that she is fighting for truth, the simple truth which she sees through the eyes of her children bereft of every complication and the murkiness of war. But when Sohail fulminates, “‘Watch out for the butchers...they are Urdu speaking’” (118), Rehana stands astonished as to how language could be a mark for criminality. Confused though, she retaliates, “‘Why? I’m Urdu-speaking. So what?’” (118).

The idea of a language as a cultural marker is very significant for every diasporic individual. In this novel, Anam very deftly brings in the issue with Rehana’s choice of Urdu vs. Bangla. In this conflict between Bangla and Urdu she brings in the much debated issue of what should be a colonized’s language of protest against the colonizer. If the empire should write back should it write back in the colonizer’s language or her/his native language? What difference
in stance should the diasporic subject harbour? Should s/he take the same stance as the post
colonial or should s/he by her/his stay in the land of the colonizer (for the South Asians in
Britain), accept the colonizer’s language for s/he is already a hybrid. The South Asian British
diasporic subject’s language is already a mixture of the vernacular and English accounting for
his hybridity. The most important question that Anam’s novel poses is whether language be
dragged into the politics of homeland and foreign land or should it be kept out of its premises.

Like most diasporic authors Anam experiments with the language of her novel and curbs the
same to her purpose. The romantic interlude which comes up in the lifetime saga of pain for
Rehana, comes out brilliantly through a series of indigenous words and moods. Bengali words
as darwaan, hangama, achol of sari, Gondogol (179), bhabi, the names of food as mussalam
and korma (180), khala-moni (184); and several things give their indigenous flavour though
translated into English, wrapped betel (185), egg-paratha (185); or directly the Bengali or
Muslim names as jao bhaat (124), morag polao (140), dimer halwa (144), etc. and often
quotations from the Quran are brought in— “La te huzuhu sinetun wala nawmun, / Lahu ma
fissemawati wa ma fil’ardi” (186). Anam not only appropriates the land, but even the Bangla
word; as if to quote Bakhtin,

The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only
when... the speaker appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and
expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation the word does not
exist in a neutral or impersonal language... but rather it exists in other people’s
mounds, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take
the word and make it one’s own (Bakhtin 293-4).

Though Anam brings in huge stores of indigenous words and sentiments which are peculiarly
South-Asian, culture totems, religious items, the names as Senguptas or Haque, et al; her
emotions go beyond borders. Her text is entirely rooted in Bangladesh and India or Pakistan
and does not move even once to her place of residing Britain but the ideas she focuses as the
refugee problems and immigrant questions are universal. She pathetically describes the
inmates of the refugee camps:

There were some that seemed less desperate, almost ordinary. But despite their
ttempts to blend in, she could tell they were also refugees...They had
unwashed hair and dirty shoes. Clothes that looked decent, but looking closely
she could see the ragged hems, the worn pleats. And everywhere they went,
their memories argued for space...or whispered into their newspapers as they
scanned hungrily for news of home (Anam 227).

These sentiments waft through the lands and Anam, a diasporic herself, captures the feeling of
being a refugee very deftly. She makes Rehana identify herself with the refugees: “Rehana
found she could not bear to look at them; she was afraid she could see herself;” (227). Thus
the “rasping feeling of loss, and the swallowing, hungry love” (Anam 227), become true of
every place, every nation.

The colonized-colonizer relationship which is one of the most predominant issues of diasporic
writings comes alive in Anam’s novel as well, though in a different context. Reminiscent of
Joan Baez’s song about the war, “Song for Bangladesh,” and Harrison’s “Concert for
Bangladesh,” Anam’s novel at once speaks of the plights and the fervour of the war between
East and West Pakistan. Anam’s work gives the intricate details of the war, West Pakistan’s
responsibility in ruining East Pakistan, and shows that England was not the sole colonizer
country. The colonizer-colonized relationship is reinvoked in the exploitation of Bangladesh
by Pakistan:

Ever since ’48, the Pakistani authorities had ruled the Eastern wing of the
country like a colony. First they tried to force everyone to speak Urdu instead
of Bengali. They took the jute money from Bengal and spent it on factories in
Karachi and Islamabad. One general after another made promises they had no
intention of keeping (Anam 33).
Anam’s novel maintains the trend of diasporic writing in her elaborate quoting of history. She had been acquainted with the grim history from her mother and other sources and had worked upon it for her PhD dissertation. As collected by Lynn Neary, ‘When East Pakistan’s Awami League won an overwhelming victory in national elections, West Pakistan refused to allow a new parliament to convene. East Pakistani nationalists took to the streets to protest. “We had no inkling that we were going to war,” Shaheen Anam says. “But we thought if we demonstrate, if we protest, if we have rallies ... we are going to be able to convince them. So every day we were out in the street, we were talking, we were singing, we were having meetings, and it was very, very exciting”’ (Neary). Anam fictionalizes the history or historicizes her fiction as Sohail, the freedom fighter and son of Rehana protests, “West Pakistan is bleeding us out. We earn most of the foreign exchange. We grow the rice, we make the jute, and yet we get nothing—no schools, no hospitals, no army. We can’t even speak our own bloody language!” (Anam 29)

Apart from these, histories as the cyclone of the 1970s and Mujib calling a meeting on the 7th (46), the air ringing with slogans of “Joy Bangla! Joy Sheikh Mujib” (41) and the squalor of the refugee camps frequent the text. However Anam’s texts are not fixed to a locale. On the contrary, tales waft through human minds and migrate from one place to another. Fiction touch the lives of one and all and communicates with the entire world. Just like Nazneen in Ali’s Brick Lane who realizes that she had to write, Rehana too stresses the importance of creative genre for it is the perfect way of depicting the history of a nation that would travel through time and space and create reverberations—Rehana embraced Maya...but instead of telling her to be careful she found herself saying, ‘Write some good stories’ (126).
The Bangladeshi diaspora is connected by a common language and a religion. However the immigrants from the different districts cherish a subtle hatred for those of the other districts. The compatibility is further disrupted by the difference in class status. Having encountered the phenomena of shift of this diasporic group, the allied events those that follow, and the specific characters of this diaspora as revealed in the works of Monica Ali and Tahmima Anam, we will now proceed to the conclusion of this dissertation. Though grouped together on the basis of their nationality, the writers’ handling of dialectics of identity reveals a characteristic difference. While Nazneen in *Brick Lane* overcomes her crisis of being neither of the homeland, nor of the hostland, and confirms Britain as the place where she has attained a realization of her self, Anam’s protagonist Rehana understands that there’s probably no stasis in a human life and identity forms and reforms itself everyday and in this formlessness lies the crux of life.
Works Cited


