

DESH AND VIDESH IN *BRICK LANE* AND *BRICK LANE REVISITED*

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Abstract

It has been argued that immigrants leave their home-country only temporarily and always intend to go back home. In Brick Lane (both the novel and the movie) the immigrant's longing for the desh will be reflected differently as individuals, although (partly) belonging to a community, internalize the loss of the home (homelessness) in various degrees and in different manners. Members of the Bangladeshi diaspora in London need to accommodate themselves to the host culture: will this mean they need to let themselves be assimilated?; are they able to preserve their cultural difference while living in the host-culture ? This article is meant to show that the answers to these questions and to many others are still open and fluid just like the global society that we all inhabit.

Key-words: desh, videsh, home culture, host culture, diaspora, immigrant, cultural identity

Introduction

As globalisation and the free movement of labour and of people have increased, so has human migration, a complex process with even more complex consequences for all parties involved. Already a multi-faceted concept, 'identity' saw itself gaining more facets with the development of migration and of diverse societies. The concept finds itself embedded in or closely linked to other concepts, such as the Hindi terms *desh* (or the home country) and *videsh* (or the strange country)¹ or what Michel Laguerre (2006)

¹ I am using the two words that appear in Vijay Mishra's 'The Literature of the Indian Diaspora. Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary', 2007

defines as 'homeland' and 'hostland'. The analysis to follow will focus on some characters in Monica Ali's Brick Lane and their relationship with their desh and videsh. We will find out how the two concepts strongly influence the characters' definition of their identity and how they are viewed by the old and the new generation of immigrants. We will also see how differently or similarly the movie reflects what the writer presented in the novel.

Identity between the desh and the videsh

The answer to an apparently simple question like 'Where do you come from?' can nowadays create debates on the issue of identity as people and peoples may understand and answer the question differently. Vijay Mishra gives us several examples of such understandings/answers but I will mention here the answer an Indian person would give (according to Mishra): one is where one comes from, that is to say that identity is determined by location. Still, the place one comes from is not necessarily the place where one was born in, though most people would think so. An individual may be born in one place and live in several others. Which of those places will s/he consider his/her desh? Is this a matter of choice of that particular individual? The answer to this question may well be 'yes' as, in accordance with David A. Hollinger, we must talk now of a postethnic perspective which 'recognizes that most individuals live in many circles simultaneously' (Hollinger, 2000:106) and which has 'the political function of bounded groups of affiliation'(ibid.107).

I will subscribe to Hollinger's postethnic perspective in my analysis of a few of the most important characters in the novel, representative of their strong affiliations with either the home culture or the host culture, affiliations which become clearer as most characters suffer important transformations. This perspective 'denies neither history nor biology – nor the need for affiliations – but it does deny that history and biology provide a set of clear orders for the affiliations we are to make. This perspective does challenge, very directly, a common prejudice to the effect that affiliations based on choice are somehow artificial and lacking in depth, while those based on ordinance of blood and history are more substantive and authentic' (ibid.119).

To focus a little more on the concept of home or *desh*, I will mention here a few of Mishra's understandings of it: as the immigrant is kept, voluntarily or not, in the *videsh*, the *desh* is not only the homeland but 'the source of homesickness' of that immigrant. And if the homeland does not exist in a 'real' sense, then it is 'an absence that acquires surplus meaning by the *fact* of diaspora' (Mishra, 2007: 2). As 'against one's *desh* ('home country') the present locality is *videsh* ('another country') (ibid.5), people become 'nostalgic about their *desh* and start (re)constructing it (ibid.6).

Desh and Videsh for the first generation of immigrants

The first generation of immigrants usually differs from the second one as the first has to deal with more transformations and must accommodate more abruptly to the differences in the host culture. The characters analysed here are Chanu and Nazneen, whose evolutions will prove that it is difficult for one to predict how much or how little the immigrants will be able or willing to adapt to the new culture. Though the perspective, both in the novel and in the movie, is biased, presenting Chanu, the male character, as a failure, despite his higher education in opposition to Nazneen's, Chanu's wife will appear more flexible, more willing to follow the negotiation process between the two cultures. This analysis, though, does not mean to demonstrate that the writer and, consequently, the director take the side of the female characters (it is proved so in another of my articles). It is only a presentation of the way in which *desh* is linked to these characters and how this link is re-presented in the movie.

Chanu

For Chanu, who migrated willfully, a graduate from the Dhaka University, hopeful of a successful life and career in London, *desh* is where success is and since he does not manage to become successful, his *desh* remains at the level of wish, in a space of complete 'in-betweenness': he is in between cultures as he does not manage to adapt to the western norms and continues to behave according to customs and a way of thinking that are not available in the space he chose to inhabit. Because of his failure, he is also in between *desh* and *videsh*. Although one may argue that this is a subjective perspective as both the novel and the film present only Nazneen's perspective, Chanu's inadaptability is

obvious as it emerges from his nationalism and loyalty to the culture he ‘abandoned’ for the sake of money. The clash between reality and his expectations comes from the fact that he assumed that a diploma was enough for him to become successful. The source of his failure is in fact his lack of adaptability and incapacity to understand other cultures instead of the Culture. These things considered, Chanu’s only choice is to go back home, in Bangladesh. In Dr. Azad’s words, he is suffering from the Going Back Home Syndrome: the type of immigrant who goes to one country hoping to get rich and returns a successful man, heaving the financial means to build a house –expression of his success that would include three stages: going West; conquer the West; go back a success.

Chanu’s incapacity to accept the reality of a diverse society led him to embrace the idea of going back home as his final salvation. A society comprising several ethnic groups involves adaptability and acceptance on both sides for the members of the dominant and of the minority groups to be able to see themselves more as citizens and less as members of one group or another.

Seen from this perspective, what can desh be(come)? For educated Chanu it will become the lost country with which he wants to reconnect physically, with an emphasis on ‘become’ as it seems that Bangladesh was not the land to be missed when he first arrived in England. He himself admits that he had many dreams when he was young and that his greatest dream was to become a British civil servant².

But Chanu cannot fulfill his dream as he is still very loyal to the home culture: to its values, norms and history. For him, Bangladesh is ‘the Paradise of Nations’ and he wants his girls to believe it for themselves. It is, in fact, not the only lesson that he is continuously trying to teach them. One of them is that one’s history is one’s pride and for this reason immigrants’ children must be bred so as to think of themselves as Bengali, not as British. He admits that ‘in a way (...) you can’t really blame them [the British in England]’ as ‘it’s their country’ (Ali, 2003: 211) when members of the hostland group start shouting at immigrants: ‘Go home!’ [sequence starting at 26:10 in the movie]. It is the expression of the ‘racist phobia’ that ‘(...) arises out of a proprietary sense of

² This will be reflected in the episode in which Chanu comes back home one day and finds Karim using his PC while Nazneen was sewing [sequence starting at 57:45]

enjoyment of the Nation Thing that is the exclusive property of a given group, community or race '(Zizek, paraphrased by Mishra, 2007:14)

Chanu does not believe in multiple identities and cultures are definitely and completely separated. The whites feel threatened, in his opinion, 'because our own culture is so strong' whereas the Western culture is all about 'television, pub, throwing darts, kicking a ball. That is the white working-class culture.' (Ali, 2003: 209). Following his way of thinking, I realize he is only verbalizing realities happening around him and to him. Moreover, I will assert that he, in fact, is not a failure or that he is so only if looked at through Western eyes. I will admit, though, that he made a choice that proved wrong for a man with his education: he could see culture only as the Culture and did not want to betray his 'desh'. It was a wrong choice, though excusable, as it was made when he was very young; in time, Chanu understood that he couldn't stay, only that this awareness needed time to be reached. It is for this awareness that Chanu left Nazneen behind with no guarantee that she will ever re-connect with him: some may wonder how a Muslim man could leave without taking his wife along and the answer lies in Chanu's education and life experience.

This amazing character is what he is and no one can ask him to be more or less: he has made an individual choice to reunite with the culture he was loyal to. Though not a political activist (like Karim), he refuses – consciously or not – to let himself be assimilated, as he puts it:

Behind every story of immigrant success there lies a deeper tragedy. (...) I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own (...) 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. (...) about the feeling of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent.' (ibid. 92)

Nazneen

The movie starts with a lullaby that speaks of the Indian girls' drama of arranged marriages. The lyrics are in Bengali and translated into English:

'Swing little girl on your swing
Comb your beautiful hair
Your bridegroom will come soon
And then he will take you away.' [sequence starting at 00:36]

Being 'taken away' involves more than the separation from the family. Sometimes being taken away involves a separation from your country and culture that can be forever. When she left Bangladesh to marry Chanu, a 40-year old man whom she did not know, she did not only become a wife, but an immigrant, moreover a female immigrant, forced to remain within the borders of the estate where their apartment was situated, in the East London suburbia. Her isolation, as it is presented in the novel (she does not leave the apartment except for the times when she goes shopping with her husband for several years now) is complete: she has no work, no friends, she does not speak nor understands the language of the host culture.

In the movie, the clash between the country/culture she comes from and the host culture and its impact on young Nazneen is the episode in which the viewer can see the building that the Ahmeds inhabit: a long block of flats, with modest symmetric windows and doors situated very close together resembling more a huge train wagon of immigrants [sequence starting at 06:35].

Desh has been for Nazneen her sister Hasina, her childhood memories (recurrently appearing in the film) and the letters she received from Hasina. For many years, in which she inevitably changed both herself and her views upon life, Nazneen lived in between worlds: she lived in an apartment in East London, knowing no one, talking to no one, watching TV programmes in a language she did not understand. Thus she created a routine for herself: cleaning, dusting, cooking, praying, which helped her carry on. Still, that routine did not make her not care completely: although Nazneen believed for many years in the power of fate (she was the heroine of the story 'How You Were left To Your Fate'), she actually succeeded in making her own fate, to decide for herself.

Nazneen's transformation from the simple village girl to an independent woman starts with sewing machine that she buys one day. The sewing machine becomes her gate to freedom, although it is an activity performed by immigrant women, unsupported by legal documents. Despite being unskilled labour on the black market and keeping Nazneen still within the walls of her apartment, her work enables her to become somehow financially independent.

Desh for Nazneen takes another form when she starts a relationship with Karim; her love for Karim does not become her desh. Although a love marriage is what Indian girls dream of when young, it is not enough for new Nazneen. She is able to negotiate cultural differences, so she decides to let Chanu leave by himself and admits that England is her home now (as presented in the movie):

Chanu: You're coming home?

Nazneen: This *is* my home.... I cannot leave.

C: I can't stay. I can't stay.

[they hug]

N: Then you must take the plane.

[dialogue starting at 01:26:51]

The same episode, this time as it is described by the writer, presents a well determined Nazneen, still not able to put it bluntly as in the movie – 'This is my home'. Ali's Nazneen can only admit her impossibility to go back ('I can't go with you', Ali, 2003: 400), which is in a way a recognition that she has made her choice.

Nazneen's choice of staying where she is partly related to the kind of life her sister describes in her letters and Nazneen gradually realizes that a life back in Bangladesh is not better than the one she already leads in England. Eventually, her desh will remain the hostland: desh and videsh become one.

At the end of her story, Nazneen takes farewell from her sister:

Nazneen: 'Sister, thank you for your letter. For all your letters (...)' [sequence starting at 01:29:27]

as an expression of her decision to stay in the hostland (only available in the movie). The sequence in which Nazneen takes farewell from Hasina is accompanied by the following monologue:

Nazneen: 'Sister, I have this dream: that you are always running and I am torn between two worlds, leaving me behind. But then I wake up and see that it is not you but me who has been running, searching for a place that has already been found.' [sequence starting at 01:31:39]

Her assertions may be understood as a recurrent recognition of her choice of a new desh: it is as if Nazneen has made peace with her past, which included her sister, her Amma, and her home country, in order to be able to follow the realities of her present life.

The end of the story is again differently presented by the writer, as opposed to the director, in that Nazneen does not practically take farewell from her sister. Though, like in the movie, she knows she will probably never go back, at least not go back for good, she keeps sending money to Hasina and waiting for her letters to come.

The main character of the novel/movie comes to support opinions like Vijay Mishra's who, starting from an analysis of Sadhu Binning's collection of poems *No More Watno Dur* (No More the Distant Homeland), asserts that the diasporic subject's identity in the hostland changes and experiences stages of 'negotiation and accommodation, not of nostalgia and regret' (Mishra, 2007:142). Indeed, what characters such as Nazneen (along with Razia, her best friend, and moreover Dr. Azad's wife) go through is a kind of 'resocialization with the homeland' (ibid.143). This 'resocialization implies renegotiation, it implies a re-reading, (...) a self-reflexivity, and (...) that the idea of 'home' itself has shifted immeasurably and irrevocably' (ibid.).

Desh and Videsh for the second generation of immigrants

The issue of 'home' may be more complicated when considered by the children of immigrants. The two characters chosen for analysis have different approaches and views on the desh/videsh meaning. We'll see that both the novel and the movie present them – Karim and Shahana – as characters standing at different poles. Though both are able to accommodate to the host culture norms and values, not both are willing to do so; the difference lies in their approaches to the host culture and to their degree of willingness to be absorbed.

Shahana

As the girls grow up, Chanu speaks more about going back to Bangladesh, for fear the Western society might 'spoil them'. For Shahana though, it would be too late. For his oldest daughter, born in England, her home is the hostculture. Thus, it is only understandable that the relationship between daughter and father is a difficult one, with

Shahana always contradicting, mocking, verbally and emotionally attacking her father. She refuses or at best reluctantly admits to recite Bengali poems or listen to Bengali classical music; little by little she even starts replacing her traditional clothes with blue jeans and one day she challenges her mother to admit that she did not want to leave England when Chanu had made all the preparations for their return to the home country. The episode in which Shahana practically mocks at her father and the one in which she corrects his grammar are representative of her desh- choice:

‘[Shahana laughs as if to herself]

Chanu: What is so funny?

Shahana: You are. With your stupid phrases. You’re always encouraging us to fit in. It worked. We do fit in. [sequence starting at 01:21:50]

(...)

‘Chanu: What is the wrong with you?’

Shahana: You mean ‘What is *wrong* with you?’.

(...) I didn’t ask to be born here.’ [sequence starting at 24:32]

The episodes illustrated in the movie can also be found in the book, along with a few other occasions when Shahana stands up for herself:

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. (...) Shahana did not care. She did not want to go back home. (Ali, 2003:147)

Her behavior can be interpreted as a statement; she seems to be saying ‘I’m not Bangladeshi, I am British and this is what I want to remain.’ It is a conscious refusal of adopting the culture that she represented by birth. She even makes a proposal one day, although she knows this will simply infuriate Chanu: she would rather be adopted than going to Bangladesh.

Because I was thinking, if you left me behind, me and Bibi if she wants, then you wouldn’t have to save as much. And we could be adopted (...) (ibid.311)³

³ This episode is also illustrated in the movie [sequence starting at 58:57]

Shahana could not go back home as she had never been to Bangladesh. That country, along with its culture were not 'facts', in the sense that Dr. Azad's wife uses the term, but mere stories told by her father. If for Karim, as it will be seen later, Bangladesh will become the imagined longed for Dosh, for Shahana it is threat: a threat against her freedom. For her, Home is the place where you were born.

Karim

If Shahana would rather speak English, wear western clothes and eat Western food, being a representative of the second generation of immigrants, those who are born in the hostland, go to schools where English is spoken, make friends with people their age without caring much about their nationality, another important character, just a few years older than Shahana is Karim, Nazneen's lover. Karim's evolution is interesting to be analysed from the desh/vidosh perspective. If one looks only at his clothes, at least during the time when Nazneen met him, one wouldn't think he is much preoccupied by political and religious matters: he wears jeans or a training suit, training shoes, T-shirts, he has a mobile phone which he uses to talk to his father, who, according to Karim, did not even leave his apartment all his immigrant life. He staggers when he talks in Bengali but his staggering will fade away as Karim's changing begins:

Karim had a new style. The gold necklace vanished; the jeans, shirts and trainers went as well. (...) Karim put on Panjabi-pyjama and a skullcap. (ibid. 312)

Karim's transformation has to do with his discovery of a new home. Born in the hostland of his parents, it takes time to Karim until he realizes he belongs or rather must belong to a certain group. This emergency on Karim's part was not that obvious until the members of the host country start shouting at immigrants to go back home. Dosh for Karim was not very clear for him until he started making a group to which he belonged, in which he felt he meant something. His transformation is a conscientious one and starts making 'things' for his attaining a sense of belonging: he creates the Bengal Tigers, he starts a relationship with Nazneen believing that she was part of the home he was looking for. Only that some of his expectations turn out to be different from reality. The new identity that Karim gradually discovers in himself has to do a lot with his looking for a desh. He

becomes aware that the place he has inhabited is a videsh and that he must find a desh; *the* desh of his searching is a country he has never visited (Bangladesh) but which he chose as his desh because he feels a stranger, an outsider, someone whose identity still needs to be defined until the desh is found.

The second generation immigrants' relationship with the desh/videsh is private and differs from individual to individual. All problems occur when the issue of cultural identity is at stake, when the individual feels strongly related to the home culture and is incapable of adopting the host culture as his/her culture.

Conclusions

Characters such as Nazneen, Shahana, and other female figures in the book (not as much in the movie) come to contradict Mishra's opinion that 'all diasporas are unhappy' (Mishra, 2007:1) in as much as it is risky to consider diasporas as homogeneous communities instead of looking at members of the diaspora individually. What desh is for one individual might be videsh for another individual from the same community (see Karim vs Shahana, Nazneen vs. Chanu). Like identity, desh has several facets and it would be simplistic to look at it from a particular perspective. After all, when one thinks of desh (home), one has in mind his/her particular desh but also the desh of a people (a country). One may long for the desh as a country because of the physical distance between the individual and the home country (Nazneen, when she first arrived in England); the longing for one's desh, or the 'homing desire' (Brah as cited by Mishra, 2007: 5) may coincide with the longing for one's relatives (Nazneen for her sister, Hasina); desh may represent the place you can always return to when you feel you are not accepted and your merits are not recognized (Chanu); desh can be the mystic welcoming place which one has not been to yet but which is expecting its children to come back to it (Karim); desh can multiply itself when the individual is able to negotiate between the two cultures (the older Nazneen who has adopted a new culture but has not abandoned the old one altogether); and, finally, desh is the place you have always known, the place in which you were born and which you do not intend to leave (Shahana).

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