

**GENDER, RELIGION AND SELF-MAKING: A THEMATIC STUDY OF  
*BRICK LANE AND BARSА***

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Drawing an analogy between the African and South Asian women's writing will facilitate us with an inference that Bill Ashcroft's statement, "All writing in Africa is a form of protest or a form of acquiescence" (Empire Writes Back 84), is strikingly pertinent to the case of South Asian women's writing too, particularly in South Asian Muslim women's writing. Both the African and South Asian women fall under the category of subaltern since they are not properly represented in the mainstream literature. When a Muslim woman writes, she writes with the double consciousness of being a Muslim and a woman. Furthermore, most of the Muslim women write under the constant threat of being labeled as heretic in case they reproach the religious beliefs or practices for being misogynic. Thus, I start with an assumption that when women live and write under constant oppression and denial of voice, their writings should mostly be a reflection of their sufferings and resistance which can bring out the intricacies of gender relations in the society. In such a context, this paper finds its origin in the vexing relationship between the religion and feminism. It intends to carry out the proposed study through a thorough dissection and comparison of two select novels, one from Bangladesh and the other from India, *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali, *Barsa* by Khadeeja Mumtaz. My argument in this paper centres on the point that a thematological comparative study of the proposed texts would help us to dig out the existence of a range of complexities between gender and religion revealed through various instances of everyday resistance by women. In fact, in her *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Susan Bassnett observes Siebert Praver's insistence "upon the significance of thematic study as a means of showing not only how a theme might appear and disappear across cultures as part of a study of literary history, but also as a means of attempting to unravel why that process might have taken place" (116).

The issues related to gender and religion can be applied both to men and women, but with women, there awaits a challenge of meeting feminism and religion. With regard to feminism and religion, one of the definitive problems that women writers have to face is their restraints on reproaching traditional forms of cultural practice, including patriarchal and religious customs. This is something that these women writers take up in their writings. But the undertaking to construct a critique of patriarchal and religious systems is something which becomes a baffling task for Muslim women writers, particularly when they reread and reinterpret the fundamental documents of their religion. My focus in this essay lies on the women characters of the two above mentioned novels. This choice is purposive and the reason is that the women characters

act as a fulcrum in the discussion of gender and religion in women's writing. Furthermore, the women characters in the novel appear as strong individuals who, resisting the hegemony of their men, make the most of their possibilities.

Brick Lane gives a rich and detailed picture of many strong, women characters who struggle for their lives and dignity. Ali tells two parallel stories in the novel. In the main story about Nazneen (protagonist), the reader is introduced to how it is for a young Muslim woman from the Third World to be an immigrant in London. When Nazneen moves to London she contacts Hasina (her sister) through letters, and this is how the reader is introduced to Hasina. The story of Hasina's life describes the challenges a woman in Bangladesh must overcome in order to survive. Nazneen's and Hasina's cultural and religious background is also important in the analysis of their characters because, their social, cultural, religious and family background plays a key role in developing their life. Being brought up in East Pakistan in the late sixties, their lives are at an early stage influenced by Islam and the belief in fate.

A thorough discernment of the difference between fate and free will is of vital importance in order to comprehend the lives and resistance of Nazneen and Hasina. We see Islam and the total belief in predetermination are very important for Rupban, mother of Nazneen and Hasina. But, most importantly she commits suicide. The suicide becomes crucial as it is one of the most terrible challenges towards life. She seems to have opted suicidal death in order to escape from a hopeless situation of male dominance. Her suicide should be seen in a continuum of domestic violence against women. It should be counted as a moment in the life where one adopts a silent yet powerful mode of resistance. In her case, she defies her religion and patriarchal powers by adopting such a powerful mode of resistance. The fact that suicide is forbidden in Islam enunciates her remarkable tenacity in apprehending a poignantly powerful mode of resistance.

*Brick Lane* begins with a narration of confrontation between fate and free will. At the time of Nazneen's birth, her mother leaves her for fate. Instead of sending her weak baby to the hospital for medical attention her mother declares: "we must not stand in the way of Fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate that way, she will be stronger" (14). This incident exemplifies Nazneen's socio-cultural and religious background where people live in the absolute belief in fate. Her mother strongly believes that God, ahead of time, has determined what will happen to her weak child.

Such a religiously rooted belief in predetermination causes Nazneen to be passive with a fatalistic view of life which also condenses her world into her house. "What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was mantra, fettle and challenge" (*Brick Lane* 16). These words enunciate the burden of religion on the self making of a person. When a custom is religiously sanctioned it becomes a norm in the society where people are expected to respect that belief and act accordingly. This becomes evident in Nazneen's case when she succumbs to the pressure of marrying someone of her parents' choice.

The ubiquity of religion in determining a woman's persona will be conspicuous in the quotidian activities of a gendered society. Nazneen being such a woman who lives in a religiously patriarchal society is strained to follow the custom of having man as the head of the family. Unremarkably, Chanu, her husband, takes the position as the head of the family and he makes all the necessary decisions - also on her behalf. Nazneen seems both lonely and depressed in this period. She feels lonely on two different psychological levels -both as an immigrant in a

foreign country and in her relationship to Chanu, with whom she feels she has nothing in common. Chanu, being an accomplice to the patriarchal norms of his society, mostly seems to appreciate her qualities as a ‘good worker’ – that she cleans and cooks well, and that she cuts his corns and nose hair. He also seems pleased that she is “an unspoilt girl from the village” (*Brick Lane* 22), a typical concept of a traditional ‘good housewife’ in any patriarchal society. Women who live in any gendered society have always to carry the burden of being and acting like a ‘good woman’. The concept of chastity and even the purity of culture are mostly associated with women. In a patriarchal society like that of Nazneen’s it is women’s duty to be the so called ‘good and cultured’.

“Chanu had not beaten her yet. He showed no signs of wanting to beat her. In fact he was kind and gentle” (*Brick Lane* 22). A statement like this becomes very crucial when gender is being studied. The sentence conveys the reader two important pieces of information both about Nazneen and Chanu. First of all, it suggests that Nazneen is used to the idea that husbands beat their wives. The fact that men use their physical strength to dominate women seems to happen frequently in her cultural setting and she seems to expect this kind of physical abuse to happen. However, even though Chanu never hurts Nazneen physically, there is no doubt that he wants to keep a leading position in everyday life. Since they are from a background of having men as the family heads, it is easy for him to maintain his dominance, where as Nazneen is surrounded by factors which limit her possibilities.

It is in London’s multicultural atmosphere that Nazneen thinks about her ‘self’ and self-making. As a reflective young girl, Nazneen is able to see how her new life can be improved, but she does not fight for it. When she asks Chanu if she can leave the flat, he replies: “Why should you go out?” (45). Nazneen, “never said anything to this” (45). She also tells Chanu that she would like to learn English, but Chanu only says: “It will come. Don’t worry about it. Where’s the need anyway?” (37) Though these examples illustrate Chanu’s supremacy in their relationship and his exclusive power in making decisions on behalf of the family, it also suggests that Nazneen started changing from a complete passive village girl. It makes her realize that she is trapped in her relationship with Chanu: “...she saw that she was trapped inside this body, inside this room, inside this flat, inside this concrete slab of entombed humanity” (76). This moment of realization actually works as an impetus for thinking radically and positively about her ‘self’ and identity as a human being.

Nazneen’s self-making is inextricably connected to her socio-cultural and religious upbringing. Being someone who is born and brought up in a religiously patriarchal society, Nazneen took years to realize the hegemony she was submitted to. Searching for an identity as an independent woman who is in full control of her life, Nazneen gradually starts to break away from the thought of fate which has influenced most of her life and takes steps towards an independent life, making her own decisions. The first of many instances where she asserts the self is the moment she takes her son Raquib to hospital when he fell ill. Instead of leaving him for the fate (as her mother did with her once), she takes him to the hospital which helped the boy to survive at least for some days. Nazneen “willed him to live and he did. In the quiet she realized many things, most of all, that she was immensely, inexplicably, happy” (122). She became happy because, for the first time she asserts the self and exert her agency. This instance should be seen as part of a continuum of her resistance against the hegemonic dominance of culture and religion. Even though Raquib dies, the joy she feels during these few days is so

strong that it stimulates her to challenge her cultural background in the future. This is probably the first time in her life that she acts out of her own free will which eventually helps her to be a self-made woman.

Nazneen's empowerment and emancipation from a passive and submissive woman to a self-made and self-reliant independent woman is shown through a series of instances. Later in their life, depressed by his broken dreams, when Chanu decides to go back to Dhaka, in order to be able to finance the trip and to buy a place in Dhaka, he depends upon Nazneen and allows her to make money from sewing, as she has been asking, and he buys her a sewing machine (191-192). The sewing machine and the money she makes contribute not just to their journey but towards making Nazneen of her own. First of all, the work makes it possible for her to secretly send money to Hasina, who now is in a very difficult situation. Even though Nazneen, during the first two months, does not know how much money she makes due to Chanu's wish "to take care of everything" (208), she feels independent. Thus, in this case, her desire to help her sister is stronger than her obedience to her husband. Furthermore, the sewing machine can be seen as a symbol of freedom and independence. As to the question of gender, it is also interesting to note that sewing is a typical female occupation. This illustrates how Nazneen makes a step towards an independent life, trying to break away from her passivity and her subordinate position in her relationship with Chanu. For a short period, Nazneen's and Chanu's roles are switched. This knowledge makes her stronger.

When Chanu decides to leave England, Nazneen has to make a severe decision: Should she and their two daughters go with him? In contrast to Chanu, Nazneen has a realistic picture of what a return to Bangladesh will be like: "Dhaka would be a disaster. Shahana would never forgive her. Chanu would be finished. It was not even going home. She had never been there" (426). During this period of contemplation, one thing becomes very clear to Nazneen; she wants to make the decisions herself: "Suddenly her entire being lit up with anger. I will decide what to do. I will say what happens to me. I will be the one" (405). For the first time she feels free to choose what is best for her and her daughters. Her decision to stay in England changes her relationship to Chanu - now she is the powerful part. Influenced by the West and experiencing the possibilities women in England have to live an independent life.

To go deeper into an analysis of Nazneen's life in public sphere and its impact on the development of her "self", it begins with her gradual acquaintance with her neighbours. Nazneen's friendliness with her neighbours affects her husband Chanu. He tries to have a control over her social life too. He patronises her about her social contacts. In his view the only contact that is suitable for Nazneen is an elderly woman, Mrs. Islam, who has strict views on the importance of maintaining traditional culture. He warns her about Razia who leads an independent life. "Mrs. Islam is what you call a respectable type, Razia on the other hand, I would not call a respectable type" (*Brick Lane* 82). Perhaps Chanu feels insecure about his wife's friendship with Razia since Razia is someone who is modernised and completely adapted to British culture. He says: "Razia cuts her hair like a tramp. Perhaps she calls it fashion. I don't know...I don't forbid you to see Razia, but I ask you to keep it in mind" (*Brick Lane* 82). It is not only his fear of getting his wife 'spoilt' in Razia's friendship that makes him talk against Razia and in favour of Mrs. Islam, but also his fear that he might lose his dominant position once his wife is no longer traditional. The reason for his disapproval of her friendship with Razia must be understood also in the context of Nazneen's desire to learn English.

Language is the medium through which people interact and thus have social contacts. So in order to participate in social affairs around her Nazneen needs to have access to the language which is completely foreign to her. But Chanu discourages her from learning the language. This can be considered an instance of male fear. Considering language as a tool which is necessary for power, here the 'male' is afraid of his wife getting that power which can eventually lead to his losing of power and dominance. Since English is not Nazneen's language, her learning English language means getting into the public sphere of the foreign land. Entering into others' domain might distance her from "her own" domain, which might be problematic for her patriarchal husband.

The discussion of gender issues will not be complete without a deeper look into the character of Hasina, Nazneen's sister. She is probably the victim of Society's reaction to the women who want to be of their own. Isolated and labeled as 'bad' or spoilt, she is segregated from the society and treated with scorn and contempt. The two sisters grow up with a different view on life. Where Nazneen is an obedient and passive child, Hasina at an early stage chooses a different path: Hasina "listened to no one" (16). Criticizing her mother for her passive life, not trying to make any decisions of her own in order to improve her situation, Hasina chooses to live her life differently. Her philosophy is that she is not on earth to suffer and she remains loyal to this throughout the narrative. As a young girl she therefore runs off and marries a young man out of love and her own free will, without permission from her father. When she later leaves her violent husband and moves to Dhaka, she is all alone and is forced to create her own life and make her own decisions. Hasina's fate in life is that she is too beautiful - at the age of sixteen "her beauty was becoming almost unbearable to own or even to look at" (16). To a large extent, her beauty causes her problems: untrue lies and rumours are said out about her and she is continually taken advantage of by men. Naturally, Nazneen is very concerned about her sister: It worried her that Hasina kicked against fate. Hasina, as a very young girl, makes one choice out of her free will, which later makes her life very difficult. This choice leads to several consequences, which again leads to new choices and consequences. But, if everything is predetermined by God - how can Hasina then choose differently? No matter how hard Hasina struggles against this, her fate cannot be changed. "Here come the garment girls. Choose the one you like" (152). Hasina's attempt to create a new life in Dhaka independent of a man is certainly a challenge for her and the other women in the factory. Not only because of the hard work, but also, due to the prejudice against female workers and stereotypical views. The quote above suggests that the female workers act in a lewd manner. Naturally, Hasina and her female colleagues feel insulted by this.

The reader is introduced to women who need to or want to earn their own money, and how they have to struggle both culturally and professionally to keep their jobs. Aleya, who has five children, needs the money so that she can send her boys to school. Her husband does not want her to work outside the home: "Why should you work? If you work it looks bad. People will say - he cannot feed her" (150). These are almost the exact same words as Chanu used when Nazneen asked for permission to go out: "If you go out, ten people will say, 'I saw her walking on the street'. And I will look like a fool" (45). These quotes are important as they illustrate what Chanu calls "village attitudes" (459) and they describe aspects of Bangladeshi men and their culture. They also confirm what men in this culture are afraid of: "The woman gets some money, she starts feeling she is as good as the man and she can do as she likes"(459). However,

finally Aleya's husband accepts and he buys her a burkha (150). When the demonstrations against "the garment girls" start, Aleya's husband panics, and she has to wear the burkha inside the factory as well. Later on, when Aleya gets a new sari as a bonus for being the best worker in the factory, her husband is not able to control himself. He seriously injures her by beating. Through these examples Ali wants to exemplify the relationship between gender issues and aspects of religion and culture. It will therefore be necessary to have a closer look at Islam and to see whether there is a relation between this religion and womanhood, and, if this connection exists, to explore if it is of a discriminating character or not. Muslim feminism has been concerned with these controversies and argued that it is important to reread the Quran because the male oriented readings of early and modern scholars are biased against women. These general ideas will serve as a foundation for the following discussion.

Another way to look at this issue is to recognize this male behaviour as deliberately using religion as a means of hiding other inner emotional feelings of, for example, jealousy or the feeling of losing power and control. Thus, through the picture Ali gives of the "garment girls", the reader can see how religion and gender intersect and how religion can be used as a means of proving power and masculinity.

In addition to their difficulties regarding being allowed to work, the women at the factory are also discriminated against professionally. The women do not seem to have the same conditions as their male colleagues: "No men doing machining. Men they cannot sit quiet so long. They have to fidget and talk and walk around smoking. They make pattern and cut cloth these are difficult job. Also they iron. That job too dangerous for woman we do not understand the electricity" (152). From Ali's descriptions it is quite clear that the women do not have the same freedom as their male colleagues. Regarding their pay, the reader is not given any detailed information, but it is repeated several times that Hasina is not able to pay her rent. From this, the reader can assume that the women are not paid well for the work they are doing. The quote also confirms the low self-esteem of these women. Most of them feel oppressed in many areas of life and they therefore feel that the men automatically are better qualified to do certain tasks. They are not given the chance to prove their abilities.

At the factory Hasina meets Abdul, who on the surface seems to be kind and friendly. They soon become friends, and Abdul says he is in love with her. However, one day at work he betrays her by telling the manager untrue stories about her lewd manners. Hasina is dismissed from her job even without asking her explanation. Outside the door, Hasina can hear the manager joking about her beauty and teasing Abdul about needing some practice before marriage (162). This scene is very humiliating for Hasina, and it shows how she is discriminated against due to her sex. In many ways this event also represents a turning point in Hasina's life, both mentally and in practical terms. From now on, it becomes very difficult for her to live a respectable life, and her feelings are seriously hurt. However, it is important to note that both Hasina and Nazneen faithfully stick to their religion throughout their experiences and difficulties. For them, Islam means comfort and provides good rules for living. Their God is only kind, understanding and well meaning and prayers become dear and soothing for them.

When Malek's (Hasina's husband) feeling of power develops and he starts beating her, Hasina decides to leave him and go to Dhaka. Again, she makes a decision out of her own free will, although she is warned by her landlady: "...better get beaten by own husband than beating by stranger" (58). This exemplifies the patriarchal environment in which she is living, and it

proves how oppressed the women are. Mr Chowdhury's (the landlord) character is complex, and in the beginning his intentions are hidden by a "father-daughter" relationship. He tells her that he will protect her like a father, he actually wants her to call him "father", and that she is like a daughter for him. Gradually, he makes her feel dependent on him. This develops further, and he accepts that Hasina lives in his flat only able to pay part of the rent. Hasina, who also in this relationship seems grateful, is eager to fulfill his needs: she combs his hair and massages his feet. However, she always feels that she is in debt to him because he is "rich and powerful" (163). Automatically, Mr Chowdhury becomes the powerful part in their relationship. When he later hears the rumours about Hasina at the factory he loses control, rapes her and degrades her in every way. He is not willing to listen to her explanations and he never questions the truth of what he has heard. In this situation he is not thinking about her and the difficult situation she is in, but only about himself and how this will influence his own life. Again, she feels it impossible to live a respectful life in relationship with a man. She feels humiliated, powerless and unfairly treated. Again, she feels that it is her own fault: "Everything has happen is because of me. I take my own husband. I leave him. I go to the factory. I let Abdul walk with me" (166). Thus, both Abdul and Mr. Chowdhury make life so difficult for her by promoting their own interests, and finally Hasina has to work as a prostitute in order to survive.

There are still some gender issues to be discussed. The reader becomes acquainted with a wide range of characters, in particular Razia, Hanufa and Jorina. These women have several aspects in common. First of all, they are all immigrants in England due to marriage. It is important to be aware that they have not made the decision to leave their home country out of their own free will. They also live in a "closed" Bangladeshi community with husbands who want them to fill traditional roles as wives and mothers, as would have been natural if they still lived in Bangladesh. After a while, when they have settled and have been observing the society around them, they start longing to participate in their new cultural setting. They want to learn the language, they want to "go out", and they want to improve their financial position. However, they also have common worries: the problematic issue of raising their children in a bi-cultural world, the frequent drug abuse among the boys in their community, and the difficult questions regarding "arranged marriages" and "love marriages". Do they want to stick to their traditional Bangladeshi background or do they want to adapt to the culture of the West? Through her descriptions of these female characters, Ali states that a combination of the two is both possible and recommended. It is possible to take pride in one's original culture and at the same time approach a new one. However, Ali does not conceal that this process is both problematic and challenging, as these women are often discriminated against both due to gender and race. Razia's male features increase together with her psychological process towards independence and a westernized lifestyle. Her sari is soon exchanged for trousers, track suits and a Union Jack T-shirt. She also cuts her hair short. When Razia's husband dies in an accident, Razia proves to be a strong woman who in spite of gossip and ignorance from those around her, dares to be herself and to take full responsibility for her family. In this respect she is much like Hasina. As a widow Razia first starts working at a garment factory, thereafter she establishes her own sewing business - a task she seems to be capable of. Thus, once again, Ali emphasizes how strong and capable these women are if only they get the chance. Ali is interested to show how Islam is related to the concept of gender. Through the character of Amma, and Nazneen, she illustrates how difficult life becomes for those women who lean too far towards predestination. Ali also

exemplifies how women from the Third World often are suppressed by men due to their interpretation of Islam. For the majority of female characters in both Dhaka and London, their husbands tend to use Islam and old traditions as an excuse, or as a weapon, to maintain their leading position in the relationship. In this way they can prevent their women from “going out” and taking part in the modern world. On the other hand, through the character of Nazneen and Hasina, Ali shows how Islam can be interpreted and practised in a sensible way - as a comfortable and soothing support. Interpretation is therefore the vital criteria for how religion is practiced.

Finally, it is interesting to indicate what kind of feminist message the novel communicate. Ali tries to give voice to the subaltern women who have been silenced throughout the history. Her message, evidently, is that women must never give up fighting for freedom and respect, in spite of their suffering and difficulties. They must struggle to free themselves from the clutches of patriarchal power and try to obtain equal rights as men. This requires that they “go out” and participate in society. Education and work are described as factors which will make them stronger and independent in this respect.

We can see the traits of Nazneen’s character in Khadeeja Mumtaz’s (a Muslim woman writer from Kerala) character Sabitha from *Barsa* (2007) who goes to work as a doctor in a Saudi Arabian hospital. Both the novels in general and *Barsa* in particular discuss the issues related to gender and religion. The self and identity of Muslim women are problematised in these two novels. While Monica Ali’s novel criticises the purdah system in Islam, Khadeeja Mumtaz’s protagonist views hijab as a killer of women’s beauty. Hijab is seen as a mode to oppress women with a religious sanction (*Barsa* 64). The word ‘barsa’ in Arabic means “the unveiled woman”.

Both Nazneen and Sabitha are forced to migrate from their home country into a new one because of their marriage. Their husbands are working in London and Saudi Arabia respectively. The way these two characters face the new challenges of living in a new atmosphere is different because of their living conditions. Sabitha is a doctor whereas Nazneen is depicted as an unspoilt village girl with no English education. Working in Saudi Arabia as a doctor without wearing hijab, Sabitha faces a lot of challenges. Sabitha is discriminated at her work not just because of her gender but because of her being a radical woman. Sabitha is asked for an overtime work, similar to the condition of garment girls in *Brick Lane* who are forced to do hard work for lesser wages.

In both Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Khadeeja Mumtaz’s *Barsa*, the protagonists are women who face difficulties in order to adjust in an alien land where their husbands have re-located them. In Nazneen’s case, things are more complicated because of her dominating husband who denies her the opportunity to learn English. On the other hand, Sabitha is educated and she is a doctor, who works in a hospital. So, the private and public spheres of these two characters are different. But, in times of insecurity and despair both try to find consolation from their religion. When she feels helpless and isolated Nazneen often turns to the Qur’an, whose words calm her down and give her self-confidence. Moreover, she tries to give her life an order by practicing her religion: “She began to pray five times each day, rolling out her prayer mat in the sitting room to face east. She was pleased with the order it gave to her day, and Chanu said it was a good thing” (*Brick Lane* 35). Sabitha, a young Malayali woman who is recently converted to Islam, in Khadeeja Mumtaz’s *Barsa*, turns to the history of prophet’s wives, and draws inspiration from their lives. She re-reads the history and myths related to her religion from a

woman's perspective. Unlike Nazneen, Sabitha holds her own views and observations about her religion. For her, religion is not a patriarchal system, but it was interpreted so. She reads and re-reads Quran and Islamic history from a woman's perspective, filling the glaring gaps and rediscovering the suppressed histories of Muslim women.

Eid al-Adha (Bakrid) is an important religious celebration of Muslims across the world to honour the willingness of the prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) to sacrifice his young first-born son Ismael obeying God's command. Khadeeja Mumtaz's protagonist Sabitha interrogates this version of history. She argues that Eid is not only the celebration of Ibrahim's sacrifice, but a celebration of Hajar's patience and sacrifice too. While doing Hajj, while running in between two hills called Al-Safa and Al-Marwah, Sabitha recollects the history of Hajar (Ibrahim's wife) who ran between these two hills seven times, in her desperate quest for water for her baby Ismael. Khadeeja Mumtaz re-writes the history of Eid-ul-Akbar as it is the history of Hajar's sacrifice. She questions the parental love of Hajar's husband Ibrahim who deserted his family in the middle of the desert and came later in order to execute God's will by offering his son to God in sacrifice. Here Ibrahim consults his son about God's wish. Ismael agrees. But Hajar is not asked for her opinion about offering her son's life as a sacrifice. This is where Khadeeja Mumtaz finds that the history is male-dominated. Sabitha identifies herself in Hajara's position and imagines what would have been her answer if she were in that position. She says to God, "whatever it is I can't let my son to die...even if you throw me in the hell fire" (*Barsa* 20). She imagines the psychological trauma of that mother, who desperately tried to keep herself and her son alive in the desert, but her son was taken away from her to be sacrificed in the name of God. Khadeeja Mumtaz is concerned about this part of history which has been forgotten. She reassesses the sacrifice and says that Hajara's sacrifice is more precious to be acknowledged than Ibrahim's.

The way Nazneen and Sabitha approach their immigrant life is different. Nazneen adopts British ways of living while Sabitha goes back to her home. Sabitha criticises her religion for being indifferent to women. Sabitha's approach to religion is bound within her obedience to her religion. Like that of Nazneen she is also of the opinion that women's dress code in Islam is oppressive. Talking to Nazneen, Mrs. Islam says: "I'm not old-fashioned, I do not wear burkha. I keep purdah in my mind, which is the most important thing" (*Brick Lane* 21). Similarly, Sabitha criticises the observation of her colleague Dr. Mansoor, about purdah as a form of cultural resistance by Muslims against the capitalist or imperialist view of women's liberation and women's attire. "Purdah is a form of cultural resistance! 'Who told that'? Then why don't men dress like Arabs? Is it not good for you to wear traditional robes and Headdress like Arabs do?" (*Barsa* 49).

Khadeeja Mumtaz again records the sufferings of the women who work as housemaids in Saudi Arabia. They are the worst sufferers for they are treated sometimes almost as slaves. Their lives are observed to be in constant danger. She narrates the story of a woman from Kerala who was killed by her Arab sponsor. The life stories of these women are not recorded anywhere. The mainstream diasporic writings are centered on the suffering and success of men.

*Barsa* and *Brick Lane* contrast each other in their settings. While the former analyses the experiences of a Muslim woman in an Islamic country the latter looks at the life of a Muslim woman in a multicultural London. As far as these women are concerned, their location has a great influence on them. This affects their response to the life around them. While Nazneen gets

inspiration from London's atmosphere and acts accordingly, Sabitha criticises the practices in her religion which she observes as anti-women. London is shown as a place which is more flexible in its culture as well as the life styles people follow there. On the other hand, Saudi is a place, where a Muslim woman cannot go outside without covering her head. The possibilities of women's entry and participation in society and access to public places are observed as minimum in Saudi Arabia.

There exists a range of complexities between gender and religion especially when it comes to the matters related to women's life. In order to unravel these complexities, I undertook a thematic study, through a comparative reading of the texts I chose, showing not only how a theme might appear and disappear across cultures, but also as a means of attempting to unravel why that process might have taken place.

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