

RACISM: A STUDY OF MONICA ALI'S *BRICK LANE*

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Abstract

Brick Lane is fraught with the issues pertaining to racism. The novel explores the issues related to racism in more detail and assesses the relevance of it in the present era of multiculturalism and globalization. The issues include: discrimination, hatred, prejudice, exploitation, oppression, suppression, dislike, intolerance, and so forth. The novel also examines the consequent effect of racism on the lives of affected people. The novel also endeavours to illustrate the colonial aftermath through the knowledge of history of the character.

Key Words: Racism, Race, Hatred, Prejudice, Intolerance, exploitation, discrimination.

In the view of some prominent sociologist racism is a system of group privilege. In *Portraits of White Racism*, David Wellman defines racism as “culturally sanctioned beliefs, which, regardless of intentions involved, defend the advantage whites have because of the subordinated position of racial minorities.” Other renowned sociologists Noel A. Cazenave and Darlene Alvarez Maddern define racism as “. . . a highly organized system of ‘race’-based group privilege that operates at every level of society and is held together by a sophisticated ideology of color/’race’ supremacy. Petit Robert has defined racism as “a theory of racial hierarchy and inequality which claims the necessity of preserving the so called superior race from miscegenation and the right to dominate other races.” Ruth Benedict has written: “racism is a dogma according to which one ethnic group is condemned

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by nature to congenital superiority.” According to Albert Memmi “racism offers overall and final validity to the idea of differences real or imagined-all to the advantage of the dominant party or to the detriment of the victim, in order to legitimate an act of aggression or certain privileges.” Thus, racist ideology turns into a theory forged to justify an act of aggression or to legitimate a relation of domination from which one would expect to profit. In contrast to Memmi, Colette Guillaumin does not consider racism as a theory or an opinion. To her, racism is a social relation, she writes: “This is a very particular relation, one of domination, which is seen as completely *natural*. UNESCO’S 1978 “Declaration on Race” defines racism as “any theory claiming the intrinsic superiority or inferiority of racial or ethnic groups which would give to some the right to dominate or even eliminate others, presumed inferior, or basing value judgements on racial differences.” More recently, Arthur Kriegel has written: “Racism is an ideological-scientific system which divides the contemporary human species into sub-species, resulting from separate development and endowed with unequal average aptitudes. Miscegenation with these inferior sub-species could only result in half-breeds inferior to the favoured race.”

Race plays a crucial role in the study of racism in the same way as culture plays a decisive role in multicultural study. Race is a false classification of people that is not based on any real or accurate biological or scientific truth. The concept of race was created as a classification of human beings with the purpose of giving power to white people and to legitimize the dominance of white people over non-white people. Race is a political construction. Gloor defines race as “a variety of the species, *Homo Sapiens* L., constituted by a group of human beings distinguishable from other groups by a complex of hereditary characteristics: anatomical and physiological (and probably also psychological), all observed over several generations, to the exclusion of all characteristics acquired through education, tradition, or social influence.”

The basic tenet of racism is that the races are innately and biologically different. There are certain visible physical characteristics of race on the ground of which we can categorize races, for example, the colour of skin, facial gesture and so forth. Biological characteristics play a part in racial differences. As a result there is an attitude of bias, prejudice, violence, dislike, discrimination, oppression and intolerance towards certain racial groups which are being treated differently, both socially and legally. The word ‘racism’ was used for the first

time in the early 1930s as a book title by the German physician and sexologist Magnus Hirschfield.

There are two notions of racism. The first one is to discriminate and exclude on the basis of ethnicity, colour, race or descent and is defined as racial discrimination in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. According to this definition the terms ethnicity and race are interchangeable. The second notion is to discriminate and be prejudiced towards those who are not necessarily racially different, but differ in terms of gender (women), sexual preference (homosexuals), religion (Muslims), and class. However, racism has been the longest directed against those of colour. The fear or apathy towards those considered to be "foreigners" or "strangers," is called xenophobia. It is also considered to be a form of racism.

Monica Ali does not depict the racial issues specifically. But it can be detected through conversations and descriptions. Race plays a crucial role in shaping racist mentality. When it comes to race, the skin colour of the people is quickly perceived. Speaking of colour, Frantz Fanon cites a quotation from Sir Alan Burns's *Colour Prejudice* while he is talking about the racial prejudice: "It [colour prejudice] is nothing more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and richer peoples for those whom they consider inferior to themselves, and the bitter resentment of those who are kept in subjection and are so frequently insulted. As colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments. The light-skinned races have come to despise all those of a darker colour, and the dark-skinned peoples will no longer accept without protest the inferior position to which they have been relegated" (Fanon, 133). Because "colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race", racism often begins with colour. The white people intend to classify Africa and India into the same group, where people are darker skinned than themselves. Without mentioning Bangladesh, Chanu is still sensitive to the idea of countries like India, which is often linked with his own country Bangladesh, being put together with Africa. When he sees the leaflet from the *Lion Hearts*, he becomes indignant: "Putting Africa with India, all dark together" (251). The Africans are black, but the Indians are not. Colour itself is not the criterion of inferiority or superiority, but the presumption of colour is. People associate certain characteristics and presumptions with skin-colour and categorize people

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according to skin-colour. To Chanu, the skin colour of people matters a lot as he himself is a victim of colour discrimination. It is not an enjoyable idea for him to categorize Indians into the same group as Africans.

The study of the novel *Brick Lane* shows that Chanu is a victim of colour discrimination. Colour is a barrier to his promotion. He works for the local council. He has applied for the promotion. He is sure that he would get the promotion as it is explicit in his statement: "I think I am certain of the promotion in any case." (39) He is convinced of his promotion while his colleague, who is also in the line of promotion, is very close to the boss. He does not doubt a little the fairness of the boss as he says: "He thinks he will get the promotion because he goes to the pub with the boss. He is so stupid he doesn't even realize there is any other way of getting promotion." (37) But ultimately, he does not get the promotion because of not being a white man. Chanu's awareness of racial discrimination and injustice of white people has been expressed by his wife, Nazneen, in the following lines: "My husband says they are racist, particularly Mr. Dalloway. He thinks he will get the promotion, but it will take longer than any white man. He says that if he painted his skin pink and white then there would be no problem. . . . My husband says it is discrimination. . . . He says that racism is built into the system." (72) It is what Chanu has concluded about the racial issues from all his decades of working among the white people. Chanu is also conscious of discriminating nature and betrayal of white people. He warns his wife not to make friends with white people in the following lines: "All the time they are polite. They smile they say 'please' this and 'thank you' that. Make no mistake about this, they shake your hand with the right, and with the left they stab you in the back." (72) This is institutional racist form that is pervasive in most areas of British society. Institutional racism occurs when organizations, businesses, or institutions like schools and police departments discriminate, either deliberately or indirectly, against certain groups of people to limit their rights. This type of racism reflects the cultural assumptions of the dominant group. Constant experience of racial discrimination and humiliation leaves Chanu on the verge of depression and disappointment. In the beginning, he appears more enthusiastic, but as the novel moves forward he looks more sad at heart as it follows: "He stopped making plans. . . . Before that, each collapse of ambition, though it dented his surface, had goaded him to new determination, a more urgent reaching. He started every new job with a freshly spruced suit and a growing collection of pens. His face shone

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with hope. And then greyed with frustration, with resentment. . . . But he was slighted. By customers, by suppliers, by superiors and inferiors. He worked hard for respect but he could not find it.” (203)

Less obvious than skin-colour, culture is a second element used as the embodiment of racism in *Brick Lane*. The perpetuation of racist mentality still exists in different forms while so many years have passed ever since it first took place. At the policy level it has been eradicated long before, but in practice it still persists. It has taken on new forms of hatred and discrimination over time. It is obvious from Karim’s statement: “The racists-they cleared out of here ages ago. What about Shiblu Rahman? Nazneen recognized the name. The man had been stabbed to death. It could happen again. Thing is, see, they are getting more sophisticated. They don’t say race, they say culture, religion.” (241) Edward Said also asserts that “culture also becomes one of the most powerful agents of resistance in post-colonial societies.” (88) Culture plays an important role in the colonial society. Fanon argues: “If culture is the combination of motor and mental behaviour patterns arising from the encounter of man with nature and with his fellow man, it can be said that racism is indeed a cultural element” (19). To avoid being criticized as racists, people have disguised racism as culture. A study of the novel shows that Chanu even regards his daughters’ clothes as a way to show his outrage to the prejudice against both the white people and his countrymen: “If he had a Lion Hearts leaflet in his hand, he wanted his daughters covered. He would not be cowed by these Muslim-hating peasants. If he saw some girls go by in hijab he became agitated at this display of peasant ignorance. Then the girls went out in their skirts. (265) Dress code is a way to reflect the culture of one’s country. The Bangladeshi women are expected to be well wrapped by their clothes, while skirts are often the choices of western girls. But when Lion Hearts leaflets points out the dress code of Bangladeshi women, Chanu cannot stand the disdainful attitude towards his country’s dressing culture. In order to show his outrage, he requires his daughters to dress exactly according to the Bangladeshi dress code. However, Chanu thinks that his own country’s standard of dress is ignorant although he does not allow his daughter to wear jeans like western youth. When he sees the well wrapped girls, he cannot put up with the idea of ignorance. Being annoyed by the white people’s prejudice against the Bangladeshi dress code, Chanu uses his daughters’ way of dressing as a method to rebel. It is Chanu’s racist idea on dressing cultures of his country and Britain.

Apart from colour and culture, racism is also embodied in religion. Most Bangladeshis are Muslims while Christianity is the main religion for the white people in London. With continuing disagreements with each other, Muslims and Christians do not hold high opinions of each other's religion. Especially for Muslims, they are living in a country where Christians are dominant. Sometimes they feel they are persecuted. The following is what Nazneen hears when she goes to collect her daughter: "Jorina said that police had been to the mosque and questioned the imam for two hours. No one had any idea why, although many predicted trouble and everyone doubted that a church had ever been treated with such flagrant disrespect." (206) To Muslims, the mosque is sacred place just like the church is the Christians'. These places are not allowed secular harassments. However, police have set foot in the Muslims' sacred place. Moreover, the imam, the leader of Islam, has been questioned by police for two hours. In the Muslims' eyes, this is "flagrant disrespect". While they are experiencing these insults, Muslims are wondering if a church has ever received the same treatment. This is the local society's racism towards Islam.

The religious consciousness also plays a vital role in the shaping of human as well as racist mentality and consolidation of people. The religious instinct is so strong that one feels automatically attracted towards the people of the same religion. Bengal Tigers is a Muslim organization. The members of the organization express their grief and lament over the murdering of Muslims across the world. They always use the word 'our brothers' not men or people in general. A participant of the meeting says, "Now America is taking her revenge and our brothers are being killed" (415). They talk about Chechnya revolt and discuss the causes of killing of Muslims, but they do not talk about others, who were also killed in the revolt. The Multi Liaison officer reads a paper in the meeting in which has been written that every Muslim should work towards one, unified Islamic state across the world.

Javaid Rehman suggests that "Muslim communities have also retained the ghettoization syndrome: . . . 40 percent of those [Muslims] with Bangladeshi origins are concentrated in a single London borough-the London Borough of Tower Hamlets" (846). In this environment where Bangladeshis have equal influence to the local citizens, the natives feel threatened. They begin to attack Islamic relative conservatism. In the book, the attack occurs through written leaflets which are circulated by the Christian group Lion Hearts against Bengal Tigers to attack Muslims: "The Lion Hearts made the opening salvo: HANDS OFF OUR
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BREASTS! The Islamification of our neighbourhood has gone too far. A Page 3 calendar and poster have been removed from the walls of our community hall. How long before the extremists are putting veils on our women and insulting our daughters for wearing short skirts? Do not tolerate it! Write to the council! This is England! (257) Christians feel that their community is being Islamified by Muslims. A calendar and poster has been removed by Muslims. Christians cannot endure the Islamic culture penetrating into their life. They feel it is time to fight. The leaflet above is calling for Christians to take actions and stop the Islamification of the community. They claim “[t]his is England”. England should protect its own religious culture. Their community should be Christian. That means women are free to be unveiled and girls are free to wear short skirts. To point against Lion Hearts’ accusation, Bengal Tigers proclaim that showing women’s body parts in public is degrading women. They warn Christians to “keep your breasts to yourself” (258). The conflict between two cultures is thus mostly expressed by means of words and only seldom by actions: “war’ and the words written on paper are deadly weapons: “*On the estate there was war. The war was conducted by leaflet. They were crudely constructed, printed on the thickness of toilet tissue and smudged by over-eager hands. The type size of the headlines became an important battlefield*” (212). The two religious groups have their own protest and grudge against each other. They have their own logic to despise each other’s religion. It is an exemplification of the two groups’ mutual racism towards each other’s religion.

The conflict has been stepped up since the September 11th event happened. Through the exploration of the aftermath of the September 11 attack in Britain Monica Ali endeavours to highlight the changes in the attitude of both white and non-white people towards each other. After this epoch making event the Muslim immigrants were viewed with suspicion. The feeling of hatred towards Muslims became common among western people and Karim in *Brick Lane* stands for such a figure that chooses the path of religious fundamentalism with a view to expressing his resentment against such discriminatory practices. This incident took place in America but influenced the lifestyle and mindset of people across the world. They began considering each other as a threat to their existence. The fear of existence led to unfounded hatred and prejudice towards each other. For Chris Allen, “Post-9/11 reificatory processes have therefore both re-established and newly established Muslims as chimerical, monstrous others, drawing upon the legacy of anti-Muslimism endemic to the European

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mindset” (Allen, 200:50) Therefore, the people started organising in the name of religion, culture and nationality. The non-Islamic people in London direct their anger at the people who are of the same religion as the terrorists-Muslims. They are not tolerant of each other. They criticize and even fight against each other. They established organisation based on their respective religion to protect the interests of their distinct community. In the novel the white people have their group named Lion Hearts to oppose the Islamic people. Later, in reaction to the Lion Hearts the Islamic people found the group named Bengal Tigers to fight back. Both consider people of the other religion as a group not as an individual. When they see a person of the other religion, they act as if he\she is the representation of the whole religion and they rebuke his\her as if it is the person who has done all of these things that they cannot tolerate, even though the person may be an innocent one who just goes to the Mosque regularly. Some Muslims have to bear others’ aggressive behaviour. This is some ordinary Muslims’ experiences after the September 11th event Ali describes in the novel *Brick Lane*: “A pinch of New York dust blew across the ocean and settled on the Dogwood Estate. Sorupa’s daughter was the first, but not the only one. Walking in the street, on her way to college, she had her hijab pulled off. Razia wore her Union Jack sweatshirt and it was spat on.” (368) Easy to be recognized by clothes, Muslims are the bearer of the public’s indignation. An ordinary student is insulted. Even a Muslim who is trying hard to integrate into the local environment like Razia is spat on. Razia is not humiliated and mistreated at the hands of white people not because she has done something wrong to them, but because she belongs to a particular religion. To them, Razia is not only Razia but also something more than that. Without taking into her western cloth she is recognized as a Muslim and regarded as the symbol of Islam which is provocative enough to motivate the white people to do something wrong to show their feeling of hatred. They know these people have nothing to do with the incident, but their religion seems to represent that they could have the intention to blow down the skyscrapers in America or some other buildings that may be in Britain. The others think that the Muslims are not as shocked as they are. They believe that all the Muslims are happy and proud to see what their brothers have done or do to the world while it is not true in case of all Muslims As research study of Humayan Ansari under the title of *Attitudes to Jihad, Martyrdom and Terrorism among British Muslims* shows that “it was clear that the overwhelming view among [British] Muslims was that the events of September 11 were

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terrorist acts and wrong.” (Ansari, 200:159) Chanu does not consent to the doctrine of the Bengal Tigers. In the non-Muslims’ eyes, Muslim is synonymous with terrorism. They will no longer care if the terrorists are really Muslims. They do not care if the terrorist attack has something to do with the religion. They just ignore that the terrorists happen to be Muslims. They already have racist ideas against Muslims.

Racism is not unilateral. It is bilateral. Karim is a devout Muslim. He is willing to sacrifice his life for the cause of his people. He was born and raised in the UK and feels British. He is categorized as a British citizen. Before 9/11 event his attitude towards British way of life is not negative. He believes in intermingling of different cultures. He is introduced as an attractive young man, sure of himself, with short hair, tight jeans, shirtsleeves rolled up and a gold chain. Through Nazneen’s observation we learn that that Karim stammers in Bengali but not in English: “It was a strange thing, and it took her some time to realize it. When he spoke in Bengali he stammered. In English he found his voice and it gave him no trouble.” (210) He has gained fluency in English. He speaks English like a native and Bengali like a foreigner. He likes to be associated with Britain. He tells Nazneen about the UK that “this is my country.” (212) But after 9/11 he takes on a different view of British culture. A noticeable change in his lifestyle and viewpoint takes place. He starts wearing his traditional Punjabi clothes and discards anything English so that he could be identified with his countrymen and be united. Change in his outlook does not take place voluntarily but it is the Islamophobic climate of Britain and reaction to discrimination and racism that enforce him to do so. Even he rejects English language and starts speaking Bengali as fluently as he used to speak English over the time as it is perceived by Nazneen during a conversation between her and Karim: “As he talked Nazneen realized that, though he was speaking Bengali, he was not hesitating. . . . Had he lost his stammer? He had gained control of his speech, but she had lost control of hers. She blurted out: ‘But you’re not stammering anymore?’ He widened his eyes, pretending to be shocked at being so rudely cut off. ‘When I was a kid, I stammered. Now it only happens when I’m nervous.’ . . . She tried to compose herself. ‘But do you only get nervous in Bengali? Why don’t you stammer in English?’ He raised his eyebrows. He stroked his beard. ‘But I do. Maybe you don’t notice in English.’ (452-453) On the other hand, the attitude of white-people towards non-white people was not so brutal and aggressive before 9/11 as it is now. It does not matter whether they were complicit in the attack of 9/11 or not.

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To them, the fact is that they were Muslims. Karim tries to overturn the possible fact of Islamic terrorists: “Karim picked up the chair. ‘A devout Muslim, right, willing to sacrifice himself for his religion. Does he go to bars and watch naked girls and drink alcohol? What kind of Muslim takes his Qur’an into a bar? And leaves it there? These stories are made up by idiots. People who don’t know nothing about Islam. Maybe a Christian carries his Bible round like a pack of cigarettes. He don’t know how a Qur’an is treated. . . . They’re saying another Qur’an got left behind in a rental car by these so-called Islamic terrorists.” (382) in reply Karim himself says that “all these devout men throwing away the Word of God like sweet papers.” (382) The above mentioned lines demonstrate the feeling of hatred towards each other’s religion. On the one hand the Christians concoct a story to damn religion of Islam, on the other, Muslims hold negative opinions of Christianity. Karim has constituted a Muslim organization named ‘Bengal Tigers’ to consider and discuss murdering, suppression and exploitation of Muslims all over the world and only Muslims are allowed to participate in the meetings. The task of the organization is to protect and preserve Muslim’s rights and culture and unite them through spreading awareness as Chanu says that “We are for Muslim rights and culture. We are into protecting our local ummah and supporting the global ummah.” (241) They spread awareness distributing leaflets, in which what is happening to Muslims, how they are being neglected and deprived of their rights, are written. They are asked to unite and join hands to shoulders. They take notice of Jihad in Chechnya and express their wishes: “Allah willing- the Mujahiddeen will see you in the heart of your Mother Russia-not just Chechnya. Allah willing-we will inherit your land. . . . It’s a world- wide struggle, man. Everywhere they are trying to do us down. We have to fight back. It’s is time to fight back.” (243).When once Karim tells, “According to United Nations statistics there was another big tragedy on September eleventh. On that day thirty-five thousand children also died through hunger in the poorest countries of the world” (416), a woman asks, “How many were Muslims out of the thirty-five thousands? (416) The above mentioned passage, on the one hand, shows the loyalty to the people of one’s own religion, but on the other hand, it is a religious prejudice towards people of other religion. She does not take notice of others because they do not belong to the same religion to which she belongs.

Monica Ali has tried to represent racist attitude of white people, prevailed during colonial period, through the knowledge of history of Chanu. Chanu has a profound knowledge of www.ijellh.com

history. He stresses the significance of knowing history of his country. Steven George Salaita cites Amilcar Cabral's claim in his article *Beyond orientalism and islamophobia 9/11, Anti-Arab Racism, and the Mythos of National Pride*: "culture is the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated" (265). It is the knowledge of past that makes him reveal the racist attitude of white people. To see the conductor, who is an African, he tells his wife that "they were bred for it. Slavery. . . . That's their ancestry. . . . Only the strong survived that. Only the strong ones were wanted; they fetched the highest price. Commerce and natural selection working hand in hand." (99) But at the same time Nazneen is unable to understand whatever Chanu says because she lacks the knowledge of history. He makes a comparative study of the socio-economic status of English people in Bangladesh during the colonial period and his own in Britain in the postcolonial era and through which demonstrates the exploitative nature of white people from the time of colonial period to the present day. He says, "You see, all my life I have struggled. And for what? What good it has done? I have finished all that. Now, I just take the money. I say thank you. I count it. He put a ball of rice and dal in his mouth and held it inside his cheek. You see, when the English went to our country, they did not go to stay. They went to make money, and the money they made, they took it out of the country. They never left home. Mentally. Just taking money out. And that is what I am doing now. What else can you do?" (214)

Xenophobia is a related term to immigration. It refers to a strong feeling of dislike or fear of people from other country. In the novel through the study of Chanu the xenophobic nature and mindset of white people is portrayed: "It is the white underclass, like Wilkie, who are most afraid of people like me. To him, and people like him, we are the only thing standing in the way of them sliding totally to the bottom of the pile. As long as we are below them, then they are above something. If they see us rise then they are resentful because we have left our proper place. . . . They can play on those fears to create racial tensions, and give these people a superiority complex. . . . Wilkie is not exactly underclass. He has a job, so technically I would say no, he is not. But that is the mindset. This is what I am studying in the sub-section on Race, Ethnicity and Identity" (38). Xenophobia is a kind of racism. The above quoted passage also shows the superiority and inferiority of races. To the white people, Bangladeshis are "dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan." Then the whites think that

Bangladeshis are not only a race, but also a “dirty” race. The superiority of the white people is obvious here. Fear of being outnumbered and losing dominant position gives rise to racial tensions between natives and immigrants. Rising inequality can result in an increase in racial bias for scapegoating or advancing xenophobic and isolationist tendencies. The white people do not want to be put at the place of others. They want to maintain their position and power at any cost.

To conclude, we can say that *Brick Lane* is replete with the issues pertaining to racism. Through the study of novels we draw conclusion that the perpetuation of racist mentality still exists in different forms while so many years have passed ever since it first took place. At the policy level it has been eradicated long before, but in practice, it still persists. It has taken on new forms of hatred and discrimination over time. To avoid being criticised as racists, people have disguised racism as culture and religion. Racism, in its initial stage, occurred at the level of race. But over the decades its proponents employed different criteria such as culture and religion to legalize and justify their aggression and illegal act. Almost all the characters, who are unable or determined not to assimilate into the host culture due to their cultural or religious indoctrination, directly or indirectly, face or witness racial discrimination and prejudice.

The emergence of the sense of superiority in terms of whatever is a kind of racism. Chanu is a class-conscious man. His sense of superiority and assurance is evident from his thinking about his colleague as follow: “I don’t have anything to fear from Wilkie. I have a degree from Dhaka University in English Literature. Can Wilkie quote from Chaucer or Dickens or Hardy?”(38) Mrs Azad is also a class conscious woman. When once Chanu tells Mrs Azad that “your husband and I are both students, in a sense. That’s how we came to know each other, through a shared love of books, a love of leaning,” (112) Mrs Azad’s reply reflects her sense of class consciousness in terms of material gain: “Mrs Azad yawned. Oh yes, my husband is a very refined man. He puts his nose inside a book because the smell of real life offends him. But he has come a long way. Haven’t you, my sweet.” (112-113) Different people employ different criteria to expose themselves as superior to others. Chanu judges people according to their education and place in society while Mrs Azad assesses in terms of material wealth.

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