

IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON MARRIAGE, GENDER ROLES
AND FAMILY RELATIONS

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Every year countless people move to different places around the world looking for new opportunities and a better life for themselves and their families. Historically, narratives surrounding migration and diaspora only exclusively focused on male-dominated spaces. The assumption that women are sheltered from the political and economical experience of relocation because they mainly handled the private space dominated most of the literature. However, gender is a significant influence on the act of moving into more industrialized nations. It remains a core principle of the process, such as integration into the new community, continued relations with the 'homeland,' and opportunities and resources utilized at the new destination. Thus, migration is a gendered experience. The act of relocation, often seen as an outcome of individual decisions (mainly by men), positions women outside of the economic sphere because their responsibilities as wives/mothers dictate their choices. In 1981, Mary Bralove coined the term "trailing spouse," which mainly applied to partners who followed their spouses in relocation due to work opportunities and the specific challenges that came alongside it. While it originally wasn't used exclusively for women, it has been increasingly referenced in relation to them since female partners are more likely to become the trailing spouse (Cooke, 2001).

Much of the scholarship on migration adopted the "add and stir" method to discuss women's experiences (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Cranford, 2006). However, it is argued that shifting the focus from solely on women to gender as an overarching social construction that influences the migration experience is more valuable. As much the former approach is considered reductionist, in this paper, I will be discussing women's experience separately and positioning gender in the broader socio-political context to understand the impact migration has on redefining marriage and family life. The subject of diaspora explored alongside themes of gender, marriage, agency, power dynamics, class, and cultural integration brings about many

questions. How does migration work to shift patriarchal hierarchies of power in marital and familial relationships? How does economic participation in the new country change women's authority within the family and contribute to their sense of control? How is the transmigrant agency affected in the domestic and social sphere? And lastly, how does the concept of arranged marriages, seen as an oppressive system against the Western notions of love, also affect the migration experience?

To discern these questions, this essay will focus on South Asian diaspora films and how they represent concepts of marriage, gender roles, and family relations situated in the broader context of migration. I will discuss two films – Mira Nair's *The Namesake* and Sarah Gavron's *Brick Lane* (adapted from Monica Ali's 2003 novel) – central to understanding how South Asian diasporic women navigate themselves under new social, economic, and political responsibilities.

The Namesake (2006), based on Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, features a young Bengali couple who move to New York, where they discover each other and their new country together and have two children. The film opens in India, where Ashoke miraculously survives a train wreck that killed all other passengers. In the opening sequence, Ashoke is seen reading a book by Nikolai Gogol, while the passenger opposite him speaks about his experiences living abroad. He advises Ashoke to move to the US and make his life there. This opening sequence is of extreme importance, not only because it influences Ashoke's decision to move to America but also to name his son after the author of the book he was reading. Ashoke comes back when his parents arranged his marriage to Ashima. Their first meeting is filmed in a tender and engaging way. When questioned by her prospective mother-in-law if she can handle being away from her life in Calcutta, Ashima wittingly remarks, "Won't he be there?" and Ashoke smiles at her. They move into a flat in New York and start their life together. The film spans around 25 years and shifts

from Ashoke and Ashima's relationship to center around their son Gogol. Gogol, who struggles with being Indian and American at the same time, despises his name and doesn't share his parents' sentiments to stick to their Bengali roots. Gogol changes his name to Nick when he goes to university and starts dating Maxine, a rich white woman who doesn't understand the traditional Bengali ways. Gogol somewhat comes to terms with his name and Bengali identity when Ashoke tells him the real reason he was named Gogol and after Ashoke's death from a massive heart attack. Later on, he begins a relationship with Moushimi, a nerdy girl he met years ago, who now has turned into a more sophisticated woman after studying in France. Their relationship doesn't work out in the end, and his sister, Sonia, ends up marrying a white guy named Ben. During this, Ashima, after the death of Ashoke, figures out her own space and settles with spending the future years between Calcutta and New York. Mira Nair brings up complex topics surrounding identity, cultural reintegration, transnational mobility but of utmost importance to this essay is how Ashima navigates life in America alongside her husband and how Nair allows the characters to deconstruct the traditionalist notions of arranged marriages.

While *Namesake* is set in New York, *Brick Lane* (2007) is set in East London, situated on a street of the same name surrounded by a growing Bangladeshi immigrant community. The film follows the life of Nazneen, who grew up in a rural Bangladeshi village, but relocates to London in the 1980s with her husband. The films open with the childhood scenes of Nazneen and her sister Hasina, living their life inseparably in the rural village. Nazneen narrates what her mother always tells her about enduring the hardships of life unquestionably. Despite her words, Nazneen's mother commits suicide by drowning herself in the river. 17-year-old Nazneen is married off to an older educated man from the UK by her father. Fast forward, 16-17 years later, Nazneen is living in a cramped housing complex and has two daughters – Shahana and Bibi.

Stuck in a loveless marriage, Nazneen lives vicariously through her sister's letters about her experiences with love and dreams of returning to Bangladesh, reuniting with her father and sister. The film is a close examination of an immigrant Muslim woman adjusting to a different life so foreign from what she grew up in, the isolation, and the increased domestic responsibilities placed upon her. After her husband, Chanu, returns with the bad news of him quitting his job Nazneen takes up the unofficial "breadwinner" role. She sets up a sewing business in her apartment with the help of her friend and neighbor. Here enters Karim, a young Bangladeshi man, who delivers the clothing pieces for her to work on. Crossing the initial awkwardness, Nazneen and Karim eventually become lovers. However, under the growing 9/11 anti-Muslim sentiments, Karim becomes active in protesting against the hatred, grows a beard, and turns more militant-like. Frustrated with zero job prospects and increasing concern over racism, Islamophobia, and disdain for the organizing Muslims, Chanu decides to return to Bangladesh. Shahana, who is vehemently against the move, and Nazneen, who's confused about what she wants but doesn't vocalize, come into conflicts with Chanu. Throughout the film, the viewers watch Nazneen's character grow from a submissive, quiet woman into someone who takes charge of her desires and exercises full agency. The film ends with Nazneen separating from her husband, choosing to stay in England with her two daughters, and continuing to work on the sewing business. Gavron captures the essential experience of the Bangladeshi immigrant woman adapting to England and focusing on the relations she builds inside and outside the domestic sphere. We understand the impact migration has on women and how their position in the families and the broader community goes through a sizeable transformation.

Redefining marriages

The concept of arranged marriage is presented so vastly different in both films. While Nair's film subverts the stereotypical Western notion of arranged marriages as an oppressive culture, Nazneen in *Brick Lane* exemplifies it as a woman trapped in a marriage she didn't choose. Ashima, in *The Namesake*, isn't portrayed as a victim of a relationship based on traditionalist grounds. Instead, she diverges from the trope of the typical immigrant South Asian woman who serves as the figure representing and maintaining traditional cultural norms. She navigates the new environment with "Nair equates Ashima's getting to know America with her getting to know her husband" (Richards, 2017 p. 72). Richards further states in her article, "Love, Desi Style: Arranged Marriage and Transnational Mobility in Mira Nair's *The Namesake*", that Ashima and Ashoke redefine what constitutes a marital relationship as transnational diasporic subjects who are allowed to explore their new world beside each other and not one behind the other. They both share the domestic and public sphere, and Ashima is allowed to live and experience New York beyond the private space. Theirs is an arranged-love marriage, and their shared experience of navigating living in New York and integration into a new culture is what brings them close together. "Over the years, their bond grows out of a deep understanding of being tugged by a longing for tradition and being yanked by the promise of new beginnings. (Richards, 2017, p. 73) On the opposite side, however, Nazneen is the exact "browbeaten immigrant wife" that Ashima isn't. Nazneen, who was married off to an older man chosen by her father, is the complacent, conventional wife whose position in the patriarchal household is preserving the authentic cultural Bangladeshi norms. Mahmudul Hasan (2018), in his article, "Transplanted Gender Norms and Their Limits in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*", explains that to maintain the traditional culture under the unfamiliarity of the new environment, the private-

public space becomes gendered where patriarchy seeks to re-instate gender norms from the country of origin into the diasporic space. Hence, women remain confined to the home to maintain cultural purity. Nazneen remains isolated within the domestic sphere and only fulfills her role as a dutiful wife and mother. She cuts Chanu's toenails and takes his coat off for him every time he comes home. Her apprehension in encountering people, specifically women, who do not bind themselves under traditional notions of femininity, is clearly visible when she first meets Razia because this neighbor presents herself so different from Nazneen herself. Compared to Ashima and Ashoke, Nazneen and Chanu do not share the same kind of intimacy. In fact, they share no intimacy at all. Ashima and Ashoke's scene of "love-making" is tender and affectionate, and their exploring of each other's bodies is synonymous with exploring the foreign land together (Richards, 2018). In Brick Lane, sex for Nazneen becomes an act of duty. She lies there, stiff and expressionless, unknowing to Chanu and dreams of her 'homeland' and remembers childhood memories of her village. Their sexual relations are symbolic of the dissonance and detachment present in their relationship. They do not explore England together or even have proper conversations surrounding the general experience of migration. The one time they visit sites in London is solely due to Chanu's desire to explore and feel part of the mainstream society. This sentiment isn't shared by Nazneen, who longs for a different kind of immigrant experience. In most conversations, Chanu does most of the talking, which works to assert his patriarchal dominance in the household. Nazneen, even when she has opinions, stays quiet and concedes to Chanu's rants. When Chanu comes back to say he has quit his job, when he brings home his newly bought computer, and even when Nazneen becomes aware of Chanu's loan from Mrs. Azad, she doesn't argue. Her ability to eventually question her relationships, identity, and role as an immigrant woman in Britain enables her to make decisions based on her desires. The

alienation she feels in a new culture can be mirrored in that of Ashima. Ashima also feels like an outsider in New York. Her discomfort is evident when she ventures out to the laundromat and witnesses the brawl, common to big cities like New York, or even when she shrinks Ashoke's clothes and hides in the bathroom. All of this combined serves to make her feel estranged; however, Ashoke's continuous presence ensures her gradual transition into the foreign environment. In Nazneen's case, the lack of support from Chanu, who is so absorbed in his own diasporic struggles, serves to alienate her even more. She doesn't get the chance to understand, comprehend and participate in the culture that England has to offer. Not only does she not get the chance, but she also initially displays no desire to break out of the conformity. "In the private realm of domesticity, where Bangladeshi patriarchal culture prevails, women are conditioned to perform gender-specific duties and to adhere to strict notions of morality and propriety" (Hasan, 2018, p. 68). This 'conditioning' appears to be a product of her mother's teachings when she was a child. One of the most impactful lines is when Nazneen states what her mother always used to tell her, "If Allah wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men." Her gradual transition begins, not aided by Chanu but by her interactions with Karim and Razia. They offer her an opportunity to explore the outside world and break away from traditional expectations. *The Namesake*, operating as a diasporic film that reshapes popular oriental notions under the Western liberal framework, presents a marriage impacted by relocation in an unconventional way. *Brick Lane*, on the other hand, as a diasporic film, reproduces the stereotypical view of regressive arranged marriages system and import of backwards cultural practices. In a way, Nazneen's capacity to break free from the 'traditional constraints' could only be done under liberation that is allowed in a Western locality. While Ashima and Ashoke's migration redefines their marital relationship in a heartening way, Nazneen and Chanu's embodies the same

patriarchal elements of a marriage as it would have in Bangladesh, and theirs grows more discontented.

Class, Mobility, Transnationalism and Women's Agency

Ashima's ability to become a transnational diasporic subject is closely tied to her class. From the film itself, Ashoke and Ashima are presented as privileged, well-educated, upper-class immigrants whose transition to American society is made much more manageable under non-existent racial/religious tensions and affluent backgrounds. Living in central New York is already enough to posit that they didn't have the extreme financial constraints that inhibited their capacity to travel back and forth between Calcutta and New York. Not only do the Ganguli family shift between countries, but they also shift between locations inside of the US. After Gogol's birth, the couple moves into the suburbs and are surrounded by other Bengali families. Their ability to transpose in and out of the US and Ashima's marital relationship redefined through migration is what allows her to build social connections outside of her domestic space. Furthermore, Ashima can maintain close family relations with those in Calcutta due to her financial resources allowing her to travel to her nation-state. As Richards states, "[Nair] revises the role of the immigrant wife in the diaspora by giving her equal access to transnational mobility" (Richards, 2018, p.69). However, I argue that in analyzing Ashima's active participation in transnationalism, Richards doesn't take into account how class, ethnicity, and educational credentials intersect to create Ashima's crossing of territorial borders much more accessible. Contrasting this to Nazneen, her intense longing for her homeland is magnified due to an incapacity to visit Bangladesh. She feels stuck in foreign London amidst rising racial tensions and continuous financial constraints. When Chanu comes home to announce he has quit his job, Nazneen asks him what will happen now, and when Chanu brings a newly bought computer, she

once again asks him where he got the money from. Her insistence, in a much more passive way, to ask is because the money is supposed to be saved for a trip to Bangladesh. And as time passes by, Nazneen feels herself become even more hopeless that she would never be able to visit her homeland soon. The only connection to Bangladesh Nazneen seems to have, outside of her memories, is through Hasina's (her sister) letters. However, the viewer can understand through Hasina's letters to her sister that under most of the flowery tales of love and freedom, Hasina has negative experiences of continuing to live there. Nazneen, even though worried about her sister, doesn't realize her sister's sex work for money until much later in the film. This shows that even though maintaining transnational sisterhood through letters, Nazneen is still disconnected from her family. Among her memories of home, she fondly remembers her mother, sister, and friends; however, there is no recollection or mention of her father. This constant separation and isolation she feels leaves her more helpless and her transition to the foreign state much harder. It takes much longer for Nazneen to build social connections outside of the domestic space and is only limited to two individuals. One is characterized by growing friendship, and sexual relations outside of her marriage characterizes the other.

Nair converges Calcutta and America through multiple wide shots displaying scenes from both cities, bridging them to show one world and not two separate worlds (Richards, 2018). This represents the transnational mobility that the characters embody and direct scenes of life in Calcutta alongside life in America become an important reminder of their hybrid identities. Calcutta isn't shown as some distant land that is yearned for. Contrasting it to Brick Lane, Bangladesh is always presented at a distance, either through Nazneen's dwindling memories or through the bleak experiences of Hasina. Interestingly, at the end of the film, Nazneen is the one who chooses to stay in Brick Lane while Chanu makes the reverse migration to Bangladesh. For

what reasons Nazneen makes this choice isn't explicitly stated, except the idea that Nazneen doesn't believe herself to be "the girl from the village" anymore. On the other hand, Ashima chooses to divide her time between Calcutta and New York, and I argue that this decision comes much easier to her because of her close ties to family maintained through constant travel. For Nazneen, even though her yearning for Bangladesh occupied most of the film, in the end, she resorts to stay in London. This can be due to her growing disconnect from her 'homeland' or the shift in her identity as an immigrant woman, or due to her increased control over her own life decisions that initially emerged from her sewing work. It is important to note that showing Nazneen as metamorphizing under the 'liberated' locality of London is still a stereotypical view of oppressed Muslim women who become free from the chains of tradition. However, her transformation is still of increased importance as she navigates her life on her own terms in London. While Ashima seems to have resolved being fluid with her identity as between Calcutta and New York, Nazneen is still left in a transitory state where she is just beginning to understand how to reconcile herself in the political, economic, and social sphere of London.

Gender is an essential aspect of migration, and immigrant women's position within their families and the broader community underlies the acculturation process. Both films make us consider the gendered experiences of South Asian diasporic women. In multiple ways, both films – *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane* – are contrasted with each other; including how migration serves to redefine marital relationships, how class, religion, and ethnicity interact to provide transnational mobility to first-generation immigrant women, and how they face different challenges of negotiating traditionality and cultural relocation. While Ashima is provided with much more social mobility, economic independence, and increased autonomy, Nazneen's

experience focuses on moving from one patriarchal system to another, undermining her struggle for individualism in marriage with Chanu.

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