TRANSLATING "OTHERNESS": CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE IN MONICA ALI'S *BRICK LANE*

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Abstract: In a world of interconnectedness, the dominant cultural relativistic discourse has placed the concept of the Other at the heart of postmodern culture. Since the aim of mutual understanding is paramount, the only reasonable strategy for knowing the Other is through an un-normative frame of reference. Translatability- the translation of Otherness through mutual cultural mirroring- has become a key concept in cultural studies because it can account for interactions both within and between cultures. It is the condition that allows for genuine cross-cultural dialogue. This paper analyses the issue of translatability and the emergence of cross-cultural dialogue in Monica Ali's novel, Brick Lane (2004).

Keywords: the Other, translatability, cross-cultural dialogue, translation, cultural transmissibility.

The touch of the unknown

The mechanisms of globalisation have brought about profound social and cultural transformations. Global flows of people, commodities and ideas defy national borders. While the nation-state paradigm has been challenged, the concept of network society has gained currency. People have become aware of the presence of the Other in a way which is fundamentally different from the past. The Other is no longer the distant stranger, the barbarian. Under the circumstances of time-space compression, the Other (in its various manifestations: cultural, religious, sexual etc) has broadened people's practical and conceptual horizons. The presence of the Other has effects "in real time". The nation state is no longer able to limit individual perceptions about self and others. Tradition has become horizontal and people have gained access to a great variety of cultural models.

The notion of cultural relativity has become dominant in postmodern thinking. Anthropologists assert that cultures are unique and equal in status. Postmodernism denies the existence of "culture", but speaks of "cultures" instead. Consequently, the aim of cross-cultural understanding is vital. Moreover, postmodern discourse is constituted from the viewpoint of the margins. The concept of the Other has been placed at the heart of postmodern culture. Form a disconcerting reality generating fear and anxiety it has become "the central value" of postmodernism. However, this "process of fundamentalizing plurality may create uniformitarian biases" (Budick 1996: 5). This is why, the only reasonable strategy for knowing the Other is through a method of un-normative interpretation.

Step inside the black box

Questions of cultural transmissibility and translatability have become central in cultural studies. Transmissibility can occur at a diachronic level or when people experience interruptions to life's pattern, such as migration. Enculturation refers to the process of cultural transmission inside the family. This model emphasizes the trans-generational character of culture. Its opposite is acculturation: exposure to a new culture and its appropriation as a result of migration. There are three stages of acculturation: adaptation (applies to first generation migrants), integration (second generation migrants), and assimilation (total identification to the host culture). Culture shock can result in either acculturation or resistance

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to the foreign culture (manifested in denunciations of ethnical discrimination and stereotypes). In the spirit of multiculturalism, strong ethnic minority communities resist acculturation. This runs the danger of ghettoisation, or even balkanisation (the outbreak of multiple local conflicts).

When the concept of diachronic cultural transmissibility is challenged, translatability becomes an issue. As Wolfgang Iser (1996: 246) explains:

[As long as] the interconnection of traditions whether in terms of receiving an inheritance or of recasting a heritage—was taken for granted, the relationship of cultures did not pose a problem. Tradition was either reinterpreted or appropriated in accordance with prevailing standards or needs.

Translatability- the mutual translation of cultures- has become a key concept in cultural studies. It can be employed to account for encounters between cultures and interactions between the different layers of cultures.

Wolfgang Iser (2001) gives an account of the concept of translatability, offering a type of critique related to the phenomenological school of Husserl and Heidegger. He investigates how a certain text is reflected in the reader's mind and defines translatability as "a translation of Otherness" through an "un-normative frame of reference" with the aim of mutual understanding, most importantly in terms of what is specific to the foreign culture. In the process of trying to understand the specificity of the Other, one's frame of reference alters (5-6).

Translatability operates through cross-cultural dialogue, which creates the conditions for "transposing a foreign culture into one's own." Iser (2001) speaks of the space between two cultures, between what is foreign and what is familiar as "the black box", a notion taken from anthropologist Bateson. The central idea is that in any demonstration the explanation has to stop at some point, as there are partially inexplicable aspects: the forever foreign element of the Other (5-6).

Translatability works both inside and between cultures and it does not imply comparison. Since cultures are not monoliths, their different layers "turn into mirrors for one another, and their mutual refraction translates each level as a figure into the ground of the other one." (Iser 2001: 5-6). The concept of cultural hierarchy no longer applies. Translatability is relevant in multicultural societies, countering the political power of different cultural segments who seek to impose their heritage upon other cultures.

Cross-cultural dialogue can be understood a mode of translation, while "translatability makes us focus on the space between cultures." The space between cultures allows for "a mutual mirroring of different cultures", because it belongs to neither culture. This space allows for *self-reflexivity*, "which can only result in a heightened self-awareness of a culture that sees itself refracted in the mirror of the one encountered", and "opens up the experience of otherness". This condition brings the opportunity of distancing oneself from one's culture (Iser 2001: 9). Cross-cultural discourse can also be understood as "the telescoping of different cultures" (Iser 1996: 249).

Iser (2001) develops a method to achieve cross-cultural understanding: "recursive looping", a concept based on the theory of systems. The basic assumption behind it is that culture generates itself through a network of interconnected processes. Understanding Otherness "requires a continual looping from the known to the unknown in order to make the unknown fold back upon what is familiar." Cross-cultural dialogue operates through a mode of "recursive looping": "an interchange between output and input, in the course of which a familiar projection is corrected insofar as it failed to square with what it has targeted." The result is "a dual correction: the feed forward returns as an altered feedback loop which, in turn, feeds into a revised output. Future projections are altered as a result of past performances." Feedback loops can be either negative or positive. Negative feedback loops

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implies that the difference between the information in the output and input is minimal, "thus serves to stabilize the system which initiated the recursion. A positive feedback loop acts to destabilise the system that triggered the recursion, which becomes unable to process the received information" (9).

Recursive looping works either to manage the foreign culture or to understand it. In the first case, a significant part of the information received "will be screened off". If the latter result is sought, operations will be informed by positive feedback looping. "Whatever the direction will be, recursive looping as the mechanics of a cross-cultural discourse allows for a mutual translatability of cultures." Recursive looping aims at comprehension, which arises out of performance. Therefore, it is a process that works inside culture (Iser 2001: 12).

The cross-cultural paradigm is useful for the study of authors who relate to more than one culture. Cross-cultural studies address problems such as cultural shock, acculturation and resistance to acculturation, ethnic discrimination, and stereotypes attached to certain ethnic groups.

Living on the edge

This paper analyses the issue of translatability -the translation of Otherness through mutual cultural mirroring- and the emergence of a cross-cultural dialogue in Monica Ali' novel, *Brick Lane* (2004). Monica Ali is a British writer born in Dhaka to an English mother and a Bangladeshi father. At the age of three she lived the experience of migration, as the family moved to England. She was listed as one of the best young British novelists by Granta in 2003 on the basis of a manuscript version of her first novel, *Brick Lane.* The book has enjoyed success on both sides of the Atlantic, being translated into more than twenty-five languages.

Monica Ali perceives herself as living on the edge of two cultures: "you know that you're working to fit in, discarding certain things. It does give you a different feeling, a different perspective" (Ali as cited in Lane: 2003). This is precisely what she explores in *Brick Lane:* cross-cultural intersections, writing about first generation immigrants, people on the egde of cultures.

Brick Lane is written in the realist tradition of the 19th century novel and can be read as a *bildungsroman.* The protagonist is Nazneen, a young woman from rural Bangladesh who comes to Tower Hamlets for an arranged marriage. The story traces her internal journey over a time span of seventeen years, her transformation from "an unspoilt girl from the village"(Ali 2004: 30) into a submissive housewife and, later on, a mother who becomes financially independent. She is caught in a loveless marriage to Chanu: a "futile" man twice her age, physically repulsive- "he had a face like a frog"(13), "oily hair"- educated but pompous. In the beginning, Nazneen spends most of her time in the crowded council apartment performing endless household chores. Her life up to this point has been a story of fatalism, starting with the survival of her own birth when her mother decided not to take her to the hospital in spite of her life threatening condition: "As Nazneen grew she heard many times this story of How You Were Left To Your Fate....not once did Nazneen question the logic of the story....Indeed, she was grateful for her mother's quiet courage, her tearful stoicism"(11). Nazneen accepts the principle that it is pointless "to kick against fate" (14).

The story unfolds on two temporal planes: the narration of Nazneen's life in London is interrupted by flashbacks and dreams of her childhood in rural Bangladesh. The new space Nazneen inhabits opens up an opportunity to revise aspects of her past. She begins to question the idea of a fate governing her life. Nazneen comes to understand the power of agency and decides "to kick against fate":

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.

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So that when, at the age of thirty-four, after she had been given three children and had one taken away, when she had a futile husband and had been fated a young and demanding lover, when for the first time she could not wait for the future to be revealed but had to make it for herself, she was as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye. (Ali 2004: 12)

The above passage summarizes the main plot of the novel and gives an early indication that it is not a story of fate written in the romantic tradition, but realist fiction with an emphasis on natural causality.

The reader gains access to Nazneen's consciousness through third person narration. Aspects of contemporary multicultural Britain are revealed through Nazneen's subjectivity. Monica Ali explores the present and dilemmatic realities of multiculturalism and immigration in Great Britain. The novel focuses on the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets, depicting the squalor of the council estates, inter-ethnic tensions inside the Muslim communities, political activism, Bengali youth sub-culture, the waves of Islamophobia generated by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 etc. These representations of life in contemporary London are contraposed to descriptions of social realities in another capital, Dhaka, where Hasina, Nazneen's younger sister, lives. Ali exposes the realities of life in contemporary Bangladesh: corruption and poverty, women's access on the labour market, protests from the local mullahs against women's independence, abusive husbands, social and religious taboos imposed on women.

Monica Ali reminds her readers of the difficulties encountered by Muslim women on the labour market, as they experience a double oppression: from their community (women are treated as commodities at men's disposal) and from the society (restrictive on women's workforce). The two sisters are temporarily engaged in the textile industry. In London, Nazneen sews jeans before starting a small business. In Dhaka, Hasina works at the sewing machine in a textile factory before becoming a prostitute and then a baby sitter. Both Nazneen and Hasina find their "place in the world" through work.

Hasina's thoughts are conveyed through the epistolary narrative voice. Hasina's letters, written in illiterate language, are translations into English from Bengali that the narrator performs. Hasina's letters are introduced into the narration and they cover the plot for a period of twelve years, from 1989 to 2001. Hasina's letters are unplanned and "full of life"(Ali 2004: 58), unlike her sister's replies. Unlike Nazneen, Hasina chooses to break all the norms imposed by her culture. She makes daring choices and never gives up hope for a better future. She is finally reported to have eloped with the cook, an act Nazneen interprets as proof that "she isn't going to give up"(Ali 2004: 430).

The turning point of the story is when Nazneen's defeated husband decides to return to Bangladesh and she chooses not to follow him because she realizes her daughters relate more to the English culture.

Strategies of relating to Otherness

In order to explore instances of cross-cultural dialogue in *Brick Lane,* I shall focus on three characters: Nazneen, Chanu and Mrs. Azad (the wife of Chanu's friend, Dr. Azad). They epitomize three different models of relating to Otherness. According to Iser (2001: 8), the encounter with the Other brings about a heightened awareness of difference, which can result in: (1) "bracketing" the Other- allows for an exploration of difference; (2) assimilating the Other- leads to a politics of cultural relations; (3) appropriating the Other- aims at correcting existing deficiencies; (4) "reflecting oneself in the Other - entails heightened self-awareness, which leads to self-confrontation"; (5) elevating the other to a superior level results in an ethics of *immemorial, atemporal* responsibility towards the Other.

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In the case of Chanu and Mrs. Azad, the encounter with a different culture generates extreme attitudes: exclusion and assimilation, respectively.

Chanu, a first generation immigrant, exemplifies the deliberate bracketing and exclusion of the Other and the exacerbation of cultural differences. He relates to an outmoded 19th century Leavisite notion of English "high culture": the culture of the educated elite which can discern between what is valuable and not. A graduate from the English literature department at the University of Dhaka, Chanu professes English literature to be his "first love". He quotes at length from Shakespeare and reads Victorian novels. The Bengali culture he identifies with is also an institutionalized version. He speaks with great pride of his national history prior to colonisation. While he understands English "high culture" has been replaced by the middle class mass-culture, he refuses to accept the realities of contemporary Bangladesh as described in Hasina's letters. In an attempt to explain the causes of racism and discrimination that he perceives in British society, Chanu concludes: "You see, they feel so threatened…Because our own culture is so strong. And what is their culture? Television, pub, throwing darts, kicking a ball. That is the white working-class culture" (Ali 2004: 209). He believes his own culture to be superior.

Chanu recognizes the tension between what he thought an intellectual immigrant's experience would be and what he perceives as the realities of racism and discrimination found upon arrival. As he explains in a conversation to his guest, Dr. Azad:

'I am forty years old,' said Chanu. He spoke quietly like the doctor, with none of his assurance. 'I have been in this country for sixteen years. Nearly half my life.' He gave a dry-throated gargle. 'When I came I was a young man. I had ambitions. Big dreams. When I got off the aeroplane I had my degree certificate in my suitcase and a few pounds in my pocket. I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me. I was going to join the Civil Service and become Private Secretary to the Prime Minister.' As he told his story, his voice grew. It filled the room. 'That was my plan. And then I found things were a bit different. These people here didn't know the difference between me, who stepped off an aeroplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only the lice on their heads. What can you do?' He rolled a ball of rice and meat in his fingers and teased it. (Ali 2004: 31)

Paradoxically, Chanu complains of the racism prevalent in British society, yet he employs ethnic and racist stereotypes. "The peasants" he refers to are his Sylhetis co-nationals. Upon seeing an African bus driver, he comments on the inferiority of the black race: "the conductor was an African. 'Look how fit he is,' whispered Chanu. 'So big. So strong. You see ... 'They were bred for it. Slavery.' (Ali 2004: 98)

As the plot unravels, Chanu begins to realize his failure in the host society:

Here I am only a small man, but there . . .' The smile vanished. 'I could be big. Big Man. That's how it happened.' He sighed and placed his hands atop his stomach. 'So when the begging letters come and I blame left and I blame right, what I should be blaming is this, right here.' He moved his hands up over his chest, to show how his heart, his pride, had betrayed him. (Ali 2004: 137)

Chanu makes a deliberate distinction between intellectuals like himself and Dr. Azad, who stand all the chances of becoming "success stories", and the uneducated peasants who experience what he calls "the immigrant tragedy":

This is the tragedy, Chanu had said. *Man works like a donkey. Working like a donkey here, but never made a go. In his heart, he never left the village.* Here, Chanu began to project his voice. *What can you do? An uneducated man like that. This is the immigrant tragedy. (*Ali 2004: 172)

Chanu believes the peasants' failure to succeed is an indication of their lack of adaptation to the host society, their alienation: "They don't ever leave home. Their bodies are

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here but their hearts are back there. And anyway, look how they live: just recreating the villages here" (Ali 2004: 172). In fact, Chanu is describing his own condition.

Chanu's framed certificates stand testimony to his educational achievements. However, they do not guarantee his success in the host society:

I did this and that. Whatever I could. So much hard work, so little reward…I made two promises to myself. I will be a success, come what may. That's promise number one. Number two, I will go back home. When I am a success. And I will honour these promises.' Chanu, who had grown taller and taller in his chair, sank back down. (Ali 2004: 31)

When he becomes a taxi-driver at Kempton Kars, he describes his colleagues as "ignorant types". He conceives himself as a colonizer, exploiting the foreign country:

But he was philosophical. 'You see, all my life I have struggled. And for what? What good has it done? I have finished with all that. Now, I just take the money. I say thank you. I count it.'…'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?' (Ali 2004: 209)

Chanu's version of success translates in material terms. He fails to engage in a cross-cultural dialogue. His encounter with the Other- as lived experience- leads to an exacerbation of cultural differences. Integrating in the host society is not an option for him: he fears losing his cultural identity, and most importantly his children's. Chanu's insists on enculturation: he forces his two daughters to speak Bengali at home, teaches them the history and literature of Bengal, and discourages them from eating English food. His daughters find no identification to this culture. Shahana is the rebel teenager whose standard reply is "I did not ask to be born here!":

For five days he had been teaching his daughters to recite 'Golden Bengal'. This evening they were to perform the entire poem. Chanu was taking his family back home and Tagore was the first step of the journey. Bibi continued.

'As if it were a flute /In spring, oh mother mine, the fragrance from /Your mango groves makes me wild with joy /– Ah what thrill.' (Ali 2004: 405)

Her voice gave no hint of joy or of thrill. It plodded nervously along, afraid that a sudden burst of intonation would derail the train of recall. Chanu ceased his kneading. 'Ah,' he said loudly, and looked around the room. 'What thrill!' (Ali 2004: 208)

Shahana relates more to the English pop-culture: "As soon as he stopped speaking she would rush to the television and switch it on, and he would either smile an indulgence or pump out a stream of invective that sent both girls to the safe shoreline of their beds" (Ali 2004: 208). Chanu creates what Salman Rushdie (1991) calls "imaginary homelands", fictions of the past, idealized versions of one's country of origin. "It's my present that is foreign, and … the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time,"(9) Rushdie wrote. Chanu refuses to engage with the foreign element of the Other. The idealized version of Bengali culture and the realities of contemporary English middle class culture seem incompatible to him. He perceives cultures as closed monolithic systems and speaks about *the clash of civilizations*. The experience of immigration generates in Chanu a struggle for cultural authenticity, there is a constant fear of the so called "occidentoxification"(Huntington 1996). When Dr. Azad discusses the problem of drug abuse by Muslim teenagers, Chanu concludes: "But for my part, I don't plan to risk these things happening to my children. We will go back before they get spoiled." The doctor diagnoses this attitude as a "disease": "I call it Going Home Syndrome" (Ali 2004: 38).

Chanu feels the English history texts perform a gross misrepresentation of Bengal's glorious past:

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'You see,' said Chanu, still supine, holding his book above his face, 'all these people here who look down at us as peasants know nothing of history.' He sat up a little and cleared his throat. 'In the sixteenth century, Bengal was called the Paradise of Nations. These are our roots. Do they teach these things in the school here? Does Shahana know about the Paradise of Nations? All she knows about is flood and famine. Whole bloody country is just a bloody basket case to her…'(Ali 2004: 179)

Pierre Nora (1989: 8) speaks of the fundamental opposition between memory and history. He distinguishes between "dictatorial memory" (history) and the "real memory" ("our memory"- "nothing more in fact than sifted and sorted historical traces."). Chanu adopts the dictatorial discourse of history when speaking about Bengal's past and rejects the opposite dictatorial discourse of the British Empire.

Chanu becomes a lamentable person, physically deformed and morally defeated. Ironically, at an unconscious level, Chanu relates to the shared cultural attitudes of the English culture: he starts using English proverbs. At the beginning his speech is sprinkled with Bengali proverbs: "A blind uncle is better than no uncle", "I chased after buffaloes and ate my own rice". Towards the end, he has incorporated English proverbs: "He is the salt of the earth", "The English have a saying: you can't step into the same river twice."

Chanu is both unable and unwilling to engage in cross-cultural dialogue. He speaks of "the immigrant tragedy", "the clash of civilizations" and generational conflict. Through him, Monica Ali conveys the image of the immigrant unwilling to adapt to the host society. A genuine cross-cultural dialogue cannot occur, since Chanu conceives cultures as closed, monolithic systems. The main plot's denouement- Chanu's return to Bangladesh on money borrowed from Dr. Azad- is an effect of what the doctor called "Going Home Syndrome": his unwillingness to perform a conscious act of cross-cultural dialogue. In turn, Nazneen refuses to return to Bangladesh because her experience has been successful. Her encounter with the Other has triggered a genuine act of cultural translation which has resulted in a process of self-transformation. Translatability, the condition of the mutual mirroring of cultures, does not occur in Chanu's case.

Salman Rushdie (1991: 19) warns against the danger of adopting "a ghetto mentality":

To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers, would be, I believe, to go voluntarily into that form of internal exile which in South Africa is called the 'homeland'.

Mrs. Azad, another first generation immigrant, is only a secondary character, but she is important to the story because she represents a type: the assimilated immigrant. Assimilating the Other leads to a politics of cultural relations based on the concept of cultural hierarchy. Cultures interact in a political way: as dominating and subaltern. Mrs. Azad's confrontation with Chanu points to their extreme orientation towards difference. She discards her cultural past. As Iser (1996) explains, when difference is totally eliminated, "the encounter between cultures turns into a selective assimilation, guided by what is relevant for the culture concerned. In such instances no interaction between cultures occurs, and the incorporation of alien features is at best pragmatically justified (249)". In this case, translatability does not occur and cross-cultural dialogue cannot be established.

Mrs. Azad performs an act of selective assimilation, discarding her past and adopting values from the host society which she associates with personal freedom. The fact that she has a grotesque body can be read as a critique of the type of relation she has established with the foreign element. There is an extensive description of her appearance: she wears a short tight skirt ("her thighs tested the fabric") she has "a fat nose and eyes that were looking for a fight", "large brown thighs "(Ali 2004: 103). She makes inappropriate gestures like "adjusting her underwear with a thumb", drinking two glasses of beer and "belching with satisfaction"(Ali 2004: 105). She is impolite to her husband and guests, turning on the TV as they speak. Mrs.

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Azad is a consumer of pop-culture: she "kept her eyes fixed on the screen" watching "a scene of violent kissing"(Ali 2004: 105). Every aspect of her personality is exacerbated. Her assimilation has resulted in a loss of physical decorum and a ruined marriage.

Mrs. Azad's physical degradation, as well as Chanu and Dr. Azad's clothing style and bodily posture point towards a failure to engage in a creative way with the foreign culture:

The doctor was neat as a tailor's dummy. He held his arms smartly to his sides. White cuffs peeped out of his dark suit. His collar and tie held up his precise chin and his hair was brushed to an ebony sheen. He looked as if he had seen a ghost. Nazneen looked at Chanu. He made a poor ghost, in his broken-down shoes and oversized green anorak. (Ali 2004: 105)

Upon seeing Azad's teenage daughter, a younger replica of her mother, Chanu engages in a polemic with Mrs. Azad regarding the immigrant's condition in the host society:

'This is the tragedy of our lives. To be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy.'

'What are you talking about?'

…'I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family. I'm talking—'

'Crap!'

'Why do you make it so complicated?' said the doctor's wife. 'Assimilation this, alienation that! Let me tell you a few simple facts. Fact: we live in a Western society. Fact: our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact: that's no bad thing. My daughter is free to come and go. Do I wish I had enjoyed myself like her when I was young? Yes!'

Mrs Azad continued. 'Listen, when I'm in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work. I work with white girls and I'm just one of them. If I want to come home and eat curry, that's my business. Some women spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English.' She looked at Nazneen who focused on Raqib. 'They go around covered from head to toe, in their little walking prisons, and when someone calls to them in the street they are upset. The society is racist. The society is all wrong. Everything should change for them. They don't have to change one thing. That,' she said, stabbing the air, 'is the tragedy.'(Ali 2004: 106-108)

Mrs Azad performs what Iser calls selective assimilation. She dismisses Chanu's argument as "Crap!". She displays the opposite view, pleading in favour of assimilation-incorporating the customs and attitudes of the prevailing culture. She, too, is unwilling to engage in a cross-cultural dialogue because she adopts the western values indiscriminately and speaks of the tragedy of non-integration. The result is the disintegration of her family life.

Nazneen is the character whose frame of reference alters as she encounters a foreign culture. The condition of translatability occurs, generating a genuine cross-cultural dialogue. As Iser (1996: 238) explains, "moments of crisis generate critiques of one's own culture which are meant to balance out the deficiencies diagnosed" and "recourse to other cultures proves to be a means of therapy for a growing awareness of cultural pathology." The solution lies not only in "taking over features and attitudes from different cultures", but most importantly "by instilling a self-reflexivity into the stricken culture, thus providing scope for self-monitoring. Moreover,

Translatability is motivated by the need to cope with a crisis that can no longer be alleviated by the mere assimilation or appropriation of other cultures. At such a historic juncture, a cross-cultural discourse begins to emerge. A discourse of this kind is not to be mistaken for a translation, as translatability is to be conceived as a set of conditions that are

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able to bring about a mutual mirroring of cultures. It is therefore a pertinent feature of such a discourse that it establishes a network of interpenetrating relationships. These, in turn, allow for a mutual impacting of cultures upon one another, and simultaneously channel the impact. (Iser 1996: 238)

A recurring theme in the novel is ice-skating. The first instance is when Nazneen watches a performance on the television:

The television was on. Chanu liked to keep it glowing in the evenings, like a fire in the corner of the room. Sometimes he went over and stirred it by pressing the buttons so that the light flared and changed colours. Mostly he ignored it. Nazneen held a pile of the last dirty dishes to take to the kitchen, but the screen held her. A man in a very tight suit (so tight that it made his private parts stand out on display) and a woman in a skirt that did not even cover her bottom gripped each other as an invisible force hurtled them across an oval arena. The people in the audience clapped their hands together and then stopped. By some magic they all stopped at exactly the same time. The couple broke apart. They fled from each other and no sooner had they fled than they sought each other out. Every move they made was urgent, intense, a declaration. The woman raised one leg and rested her boot (Nazneen saw the thin blade for the first time) on the other thigh, making a triangular flag of her legs, and spun around until she would surely fall but didn't. She did not slow down. She stopped dead and flung her arms above her head with a look so triumphant that you knew she had conquered everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her. What is this called?' said Nazneen.

Chanu glanced at the screen. 'Ice skating,' he said, in English.

'Ice e-skating,' said Nazneen. (Ali 2004: 32)

The scene can be discussed as an act of cultural translation. She is trying to translate a performance. Emotions and psychological states "are based on cultural conventions, while a performance is bound to its cultural setting. The action, the performance aspect, is rich in meaning in search of a translation (Rosman & Rubel 2003: 18).

Nazneen is unable to translate the performance she sees because she does not understand the cultural context. This is her first incursion into the foreign culture. To use Iser's theory of recursive looping (2001) her feed-forward returns as a positive feed-back that starts to destabilize the system that initiated the operation. She interprets the performance as a kind of “magic”, a tender scene between two lovers and she admires the woman's mobility and control over nature, her own body and the opposite sex. At this point, a heightened self-awareness begins to emerge and also a desire to correct existing deficiencies. The foreign element of the Other has started to impact on her own culture.

Nazneen cannot perform the translation because she does not have access to the cultural codes operating inside the host society. Translation depends on the interpreter's cultural context: "when we translate, it is not simply propositional knowledge ascribed to the individual mind which is involved, but translation is the communication of cultural knowledge"(Silverstein as cited in Rosman & Rubel 2003: 18).

At a later point, Nazneen sees a picture of ice-skaters in an English magazine and she associates the female skater to "a fairy-tale creature, a Hindu goddess" and she imagines herself on the ice-rink, dreaming of personal freedom: "the man let go of her hand but she was not afraid. She lowered her leg and she skated on"(Ali 2004: 140). Elements of the two cultures meet and Nazneen can now relate to the foreign culture, even though only at the level of imagination, not yet through actions.

Years after, when she watches another ice-skating performance she interprets it through the lens of the western culture, adopting specific themes and language: "Nazneen looked at the couple on the television screen, the false smiles, the made-up faces, the demented illusion of freedom chasing around their enclosure. Turn it off, she said" (Ali 2004:

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355). The performance has lost any trace of the initial interpretation. Each act of translation sets the meaning only provisionally.

The novel ends with a scene at the skating rink. Nazneen is about to skate in a sari, her daughter has prepared English sandwiches, and her friend expresses the idea that in England you can do whatever you want. Nazneen preserves the dress-code of her culture, yet engages in a foreign cultural practice. Moreover, "in her mind, she is already there"(Ali 2004: 435), implying that her actions that far had made possible this act of genuine cross-cultural dialogue.

Nazneen's first act of independence is to wander through the streets of London on her own. She investigates the surroundings and observes the passers-by, performing an act of cultural translation. She sees the world through her own cultural framework which acts like a filter on reality. The figures of speech she employs, mostly similes and metaphors, reflect the act of constant comparison and negotiation of meanings. The lexicon pertains to the conceptual framework of her rural past in Bangladesh. The idea that language is crucial in the interpretation of reality is reinforced. Crossing the street "was like walking out in the monsoon and hoping to dodge the raindrops", "a horn blared like an ancient muezzin", a skyscraper was "a building without an end", "dark as a night pond" and "above, somewhere, it crushed the cloud"(Ali 2004: 51). Other buildings were "white stone palaces." Men "barked at each other", women "had strange hair…pumped up like a snake's hood". At some point, the act of cultural mirroring occurs: "Nazneen… began to be aware of herself: Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination. A leafshake of fear – or was it excitement? – passed through her legs." She exchanges glances with a woman in "rich", "solid" clothes: "her armor and her ringed fingers weapons" and Nazneen realizes she is "no longer invisible" (Ali 2004: 51).

Iser (1996) notes that the density of metaphors and similes points to the "black box" between cultures, the situation when the foreign element of the Other can no longer be explained. While metaphors represent a struggle for at the meaning, "their density and dispersal cancel out the very representativeness they appear to have achieved." (250)

There are many instances in the novel where translatability, the mutual mirroring of cultures, can be analysed For instance, Nazneen observes Otherness through "the clothing paradigm"(Boia 2000: 138). She notices that "[the white women's] shoulders were padded up and out. They could balance a bucket on each side and not spill a drop of water." (Ali 2004: 39). A sense of heightened self-awareness emerges at the encounter with the Other.

Nazneen begins to suspect that changing the clothing style can alter one's identity. An interesting scene in the novel is when Nazneen is looking at herself in the mirror and sees her reflection through cultural lens:

The sari, which seconds ago had felt light as air, became heavy chains…she stood at the back, next to the pillows, she could see herself in the dressing-table mirror. Suddenly, she was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well… For a glorious moment it was clear that clothes, not fate, made her life. (Ali 2004: 273)

Nazneen's engagement with the foreign culture leads to a transformation of her identity. She accepts the core values of western civilization, the components of modern liberalism: the primacy of the individual versus the collective self (she refuses to join Bengal Tigers-a Muslim political faction), utilitarianism (*les affairs*, the value of the money- Nazneen starts a clothing company with Razia), civil liberties and urban cultures. Nazneen does not reject her cultural past, but chooses to negotiate aspects of the two cultures, acting like a merchant. She neither assimilates nor rejects the values of the host country. She engages in cross-cultural dialogue. From this cultural exchange and negotiation, she emerges as an independent woman, able to exert her own agency. Islamic fatalism is no longer the ruling principle of her life. Her encounter with the Other has led to a creative process of self-

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formation. Nazneen finally finds "a place in the world". Monica Ali pleads for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding which can only be established if cultural encounters are open towards translatability: a mutual mirroring of cultures.

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