

Construction and Transformation of British Asians' Cultural Identity in British Films

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梗概

近年、イギリスメディアにおいてプロスポーツ選手や俳優といったアジア系イギリス人が頻繁に見られるようになっている。彼らの姿は、カレーを食べたり、独特なアクセントがある英語を使ったりといった、もはや我々がイメージするようなものではない。そこで本論文では、彼らの文化的アイデンティティがイギリス映画の中でどのように表現されているのかを分析する。第1章では *Bend It Like Beckham* の中で、第2世代である女の子が第1世代である両親と文化的世代間ギャップに苦しめられながらも、祖国の文化とイギリス文化の両方が共存可能だということを証明しながら、彼女の夢であるプロサッカー選手になる事を叶えていく姿を追う。第2章では *My Beautiful Laundrette* の中で、主にサッチャー政権が築いた実力主義社会が、世代が異なるパキスタン系の登場人物たちにどのように影響したか分析する。第3章では *Brick Lane* の中で、バングラデッシュ系の登場人物3人が、失業、不倫、9/11後の過激な反動などの異なった経験を通して、異なった文化的アイデンティティにたどり着く様子を分析する。本論文は、これら3つの章を考察した上で、イギリス社会の変容を通して、アジア系イギリス人がイギリス映画でどのように表現されているかを解き明かしていく。

Introduction

British Asians have been gradually visible in the British media. We seldom see them eating curry and speaking English with a funny accent nowadays. British Indian footballer Michael Chopra has played for various Premier League clubs. Michael Chopra is the first footballer of half-Indian descent to play and score in the English football league. Neil Taylor, another British Indian footballer, also plays for Swansea City since 2010. Amir Khan, former WBA and IBF champion, is British Pakistani. Not only is Asad Shan a world-renowned actor and fashion model, but also he is known as a TV presenter. As they represent different values and talents, British Asians are no longer monolithic entity. What is their cultural identity? How are they portrayed in the media, especially in British films? The purpose of this thesis is to explore this question through analysis of three films: *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Brick Lane* (2007). Those three films display different aspects of British Asians' cultural identity, shaped by such different factors as generations, changes in economic policy and political events. Various factors like these make it hard for non-British audiences to grasp a whole picture of British Asians' cultural identity in British films.

Britain is now made up of people from a variety of ethnic groups. Historically, Britain had leadership over many colonies. After WWII, India and Pakistan won their independence from Britain in 1947. During the period of economic growth, Britain positively accepted workers from their old colonies as a cheap workforce in order to solve its shortage of laborers. Since that time, the number of Asian immigrants has rapidly increased in the UK. As many have settled in the UK, they have had to refashion themselves a new cultural identity. Also, second-generation immigrants have found themselves culturally different from their parents. They have found it hard to identify fully with white British people or with their parents. This problem of cultural identification is complicated by their diverse experiences such as interracial romantic relationships, sports and business after Thatcherism, white riots in the 1980s and white backlash after 9/11.

With the increase of British Asians, more and more films have begun to explore their cultural identity. In the 1980s, a noted film director Stephen Frears collaborated with a British Pakistani novelist and screenwriter Hanif Kureishi and produced such films as *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987). They focus on British Asians' lives under Thatcher's premiership. Although critics praised these films, it was

not until the 1990s that British Asian films became commercially successful and widely recognized as an “area representative of ‘British cinema’” (Korte and Sternberg 9). Once Ayub Khan-Din’s play *East Is East* (1996) was adapted for cinema in 1999, it became both critically and commercially successful with the UK gross being more than 10 million pounds by 2000. *Bend It Like Beckham* turned out to be even more commercially successful in Britain (£11m) and much more internationally successful with the US gross being 32 million dollars (eight times as large as that of *East Is East*). Both films explore a generation gap within British Asian community. *Bend It Like Beckham*, in particular, focuses on a British Indian girl who wants to be a professional footballer. The complexity of social and commercial successes of British Asian films, more complex films have begun to explore complexity of British Asian identity determined by generations, experiences of such historical events as the Bangladeshi War of Independence and white backlash after 9/11.

Barbara Korte and Claudia Sternberg’s *Bidding for the Mainstream?: Black and Asian British Film since the 1990s* (2004) is one of the first books that specifically study Black British and British Asian films. It provides a critical analysis of films such as *East Is East* and *Bend It Like Beckham*. This book seeks how films and televisions of the

1990s and the early 2000s portray Black British and British Asian in the mainstream that “mainstream culture” for British people is recognized as “white” and “commercial” (Korte and Sternberg 8). Also, there have been many books and articles on *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Brick Lane*. In his book *British Cinema in the 1980s: Issues and Themes* (2000), John Hill spends two chapters on Asian-themed films out of 11 chapters. He discusses Hanif Kureishi’s films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. Hill explores, especially in chapter 10, how these two films mirror aspects of British Asian life under such headings as “Living with Difference”, “Sexuality” and “In-Betweenness”. Also, Bart Moore-Gilbert analyzes the works of Hanif Kureishi, the author of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, in relation to social and cultural issues. As for *Brick Lane*, many critics and reviewers have contributed articles on Monica Ali’s novel. Geraldine Bedell sums up *Brick Lane* in her book review. She states that this “funny” and “painful” book shows us “a great swath of immigrant experience” (Bedell para. 8). Although “[n]othing is resolved in the end”, much is left to our imagination—reminding us of the pleasure of reading a novel (Bedell para. 9). Despite the novel’s critical success, however, its film adaptation has rarely been discussed.

This thesis seeks to identify factors contributing to diversity within British Asian

cultural identity in British films. In Chapter 1, I would like to analyse the way the generation gap in British Indian community is explored in *Bend In Like Beckham*. In this film, second-generation British Asians try to co-exist with white and black British friends, while they are caught between their parents' culture and white British culture.

The heroine's dream to be a professional footballer is contrasted by old-fashioned, patriarchal ideas traditional parents have. Her cultural identity deserves a critical attention.

In Chapter 2, I would like to explore a more complex case of British Pakistanis' cultural identification in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Although it is older than *Bend It Like Beckham*, this film provides a more nuanced view of British Asians' cultural identity, which has been determined not merely by generations but also by diverse factors as political affiliations and job opportunities. Among these, different responses to Thatcherism are cited as a key factor. In Chapter 3, I would like to analyse *Brick Lane*. In this film, British Bangladeshi characters refashion themselves a new cultural identity but reach totally different conclusions through their different experiences including extramarital affairs, unemployment and white backlash after 9/11. In this way, I hope to clarify the ways British films have represented the construction of British Asians' cultural identity.

Chapter 1

Generation Gap Concerning Immigrants' Cultural Identity in *Bend It Like Beckham*

Bend It Like Beckham explores the generation gap concerning immigrants' cultural identity. This British comedy shows the conflicts between a British Indian girl Jess's ambition to be a professional footballer and her parents' traditional wish to make her a "proper" woman in a traditional sense of the word. *Bend It Like Beckham* probes into the contemporary problems such as conflicts specific to British Indians through the confrontations between Jess and her parents. This film suggests that the first generation adheres to traditional cultural identity, whilst the second generation's attitude towards their parents has been changing. This chapter mainly explores two areas where the generation gap manifests most prominently: education and sexual relationship.

Throughout *Bend It Like Beckham*, Jess is tired of the confines of the traditional family, particularly its expectation of their children. This causes a problem as she dreams of becoming a professional footballer in America. Jess hopes to play in Women's football league of the United States, as it is regarded as one of the most competitive leagues in the world. However, her parents never allow her to play football because she is already

considered as an adult woman and expected to behave as such. They believe that adult women should spend more time in study as well as leisure activities that they think are appropriate for adult women, not football. At the beginning of this film, Jess imagines herself playing football as a member of Manchester United (one of the biggest football teams in the world) in which her favourite player David Beckham plays, while her mother insists to a football commentator, “She is bringing shame on the family” and “Do not encourage her” (*Bend It Like Beckham*). These remarks encapsulate her generation’s desire to keep their children away from British culture,¹ despite the increasing cultural hybridisation to which second-generation immigrants are exposed.² This view is confirmed by Joe’s (football coach) remark. He admits, “I have never seen an Indian girl into football” (*Bend It Like Beckham*). This suggests that it is quite rare for British Indians to be in football. Parents would like their daughters to be “proper” women. “Proper” women can cook well, get higher education and get married to nice Indian boys. In India, sons are traditionally regarded as potential wage-earners, whereas girls are regarded as future housewives responsible for domestic chores (Roger 59).

There is a greater generation gap between first-generation and the second-generation immigrants especially in the area of education. First-generation

immigrants regard higher education as essential for their life (Hill 102). Indeed, immigrants generally place a very high value on education and often have high and unrealistic expectations of their children (Hill 102). This is because higher education can lead to higher status. On the other hand, higher education is still a key to success for second-generation immigrants, but they believe that other routes can also lead to success (Hase 165). In this film, Jess is eager to play football, while she achieves well at school. This points to the fact that second-generation immigrants believe that it is possible or even desirable to achieve the balance between school and sports. In fact, Indian people have stressed the importance of sports as well as study recently. According to a recent newspaper article, a hockey legend Balbir Singh Senior, a former Olympian, insists that “India’s youth must balance sports and studies” (“India’s youth must balance sports and studies, says former Olympian Balbir Singh Senior”, para 1). In addition, there is no racism in English football claimed by Kilvington.

Meritocracy assumes that the playing field is level and that the individual’s character, commitment and dedication results in their ultimate success or failure. The myth of meritocracy was controversially emphasised by former Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho:

There is no racism in football. If you are good, you are good. If you are good, you get the job. If you are good, you prove that you deserve the job.

Football is not stupid to close the doors to top people. If you are top, you are top. (Qtd in Kilvington 2)

Kilvington quotes famous football manager Jose Mourinho's statement in order to show that there is no racism in English football and open to every single one despite of race and sex. Regarding British Asian, a changing social climate, legislation and government-banked initiatives have helped to rid popular sports of more "open" shows of racism in Britain. As a result, British sports (particularly Football) are increasingly multicultural. That might emerge the environment that the way to success for British Asian is not only study but also sports (Ismond xiv-xv). However, it is absolutely not easy to success at the stage for British Asian, they have been getting more chances though (Kilvington 2).

Sexual love and marriage is also the domain where the generation gap becomes greater. First-generation immigrants and second-generation immigrants are different in

two ways: the former try to impose on the latter not only the traditional values such as chastity and modesty but also the tradition of arranged marriage or the prohibition of miscegenation or interracial/interethnic marriage (Sakuma 84-90).³ A girl must preserve her chastity and must be trained to be a submissive, well-ordered housewife. In addition, the idea of premarital love is by no means unknown in India. It is simply unacceptable. That is why Indian films are full of elopements and “star crossed lovers” (Roger 59-61).

First-generation immigrants from the Indian subcontinent likely prohibit their children not only from dating or engaging in premarital affairs but also from looking sexually provocative. Jess’s parents do not allow her to show bare legs in public. When Jess is playing football with her male friends in the park, her mother sees one of them touch her on the body. Subsequently, her mother preaches her in front of the picture of the Holy Man, commonly known as Babaji. This picture plays a significant role in this film. In every important scene, this picture appears in the background. When her parents check Jess’s grades and when they ask her if she kissed a boy on the road, this picture is shown as a subordinate element that appears behind the family members.

Needless to say, marriage is a controversial issue. In India, it is exceedingly common for a girl to get married to an Indian boy because an arranged marriage is still

widely practiced (Sakuma 84). Moreover, it is very uncommon to get married outside their religious group (Sakuma 85). As Jess's family is Sikh, she is expected to marry a Sikh. In this film, the mother warns her not to have a relationship with white boys by referring to the father's niece. She used to be a model and often wear a "small skirt". She got married to a white boy, but they were divorced very quickly. So she never want her child to be like the niece. In their religious group, girls usually get married at 16 or 17 and boys at 19 or 20 (Roger 61). Jess's mother also remarks, "I was married at her age" (*Bend It Like Beckham*). Although there are these unspoken agreements among their religious group, Jess is eager to play football rather than getting married at this suitable age for marriage. Furthermore, she is in love with her football coach Joe. This film suggests that she wants to love boys freely like white British girls. For the first generation, a white male is absolutely unthinkable as a marital partner. They believe that free love as well as premarital sex should be prohibited, so dating with someone other than his or her prospective partner is unacceptable. That means that Jess violates this code of conduct by going to a nightclub and kissing. Jess's sister Pinky adheres to the same idea as the first generation. She is infuriated at Jess, saying, "Do you want to be stared at by every family that do because you married the English bloke?" (*Bend It Like Beckham*). However, Jess

kisses Joe at the airport in the end and their relationship develops into love. For the second generation, interracial marriage has become more and more acceptable.

Throughout this film, the second generation's new way of thinking is presented favourably. When Jess and Joe are talking about the missed penalty kick in the nightclub, Joe comforts her by saying, "You are part of a tradition" (*Bend It Like Beckham*).

England's national team has been traditionally weak at penalty kick, and their semi-final penalty-shootout defeats to Germany in the 1990s are remembered with bitter remorse.

This dialogue reminds the audience that Jess is more like British not only in the area of football but also in everyday life. When Jess tries to convince her parents, she argues that there is an Asian captain in England's cricket team, so race does not matter in sports.

When her father remembers that he was "kicked out" from his cricket team by white British people, she points out that "the time is changing", suggesting that Asian people gradually have been accepted by white English people. Her parents finally understand Jess and choose to accept her as she is. Finally, Jess is able to leave the UK for the USA to play at a professional stage. Thus, this film not only reflects the reality of second-generation immigrants' assimilation to white British culture but also suggests a possibility of co-existence of the traditionally-minded first generation as the assimilated

second generation. However, another aspect of this film deserves close attention in this context, as Heinen claims that the main target audiences are not identical and *Bend It Like Beckham* is primarily aimed at non-Indian viewers (Heinen 66). This statement can point to a possibility that the confrontation between the first and second-generation immigrants may be misrepresented throughout this film. The film's promotion poster may prove it. That poster "described it as 'hilariously fresh and funny' and it emphasised the film's Britishness" (Korte and Sternberg 169). The poster also expressly subordinates Asian tradition to football as an element of a general British culture. It provocatively asks: "Who wants to cook Aloo Gobi when you can bend a ball like Beckham?" Korte and Sternberg suggest, "it is not cooking as universally 'feminine' occupation which is subordinated to playing football like the star of the English national team, but cooking as part of a specific Asian cultural context" (Korte and Sternberg 170-71). Although this film mirrors the reality of second-generation immigrants that cannot accept the first-generation's values, it is problematic that the film deems such second-generation immigrants to be the only representative of the whole second-generation immigrant population.

Chapter 2

Cultural Identity of Two Generations of Asian Immigrants in *My Beautiful Laundrette*

My Beautiful Laundrette underscores the complexity in cultural identity between the first and second generations of British Pakistanis. Set in the South London of the 1980s, the film follows the coming of age of the protagonist Omar, the son of the exiled journalist Hussein. Omar begins to run a small launderette, which his uncle Nasser, successful entrepreneur, has given him. He works with or rather “hires” Johnny, Omar’s old White British friend. The interactions between Hussein, Nasser and Omar point to different types of cultural identity. This chapter explores not only the difference between the two generations (Hussein and Nasser belong to the first generation, while Omar belongs to the second) but also the difference within one generation, or a variety of ways immigrants can articulate their own cultural identity.

The difference in cultural identity between two generations can be most remarkably illustrated by the relationship between Omar and his father Hussein. Hussein is alienated by present and obsessed by the past that no longer exists, while Omar looks to the future. Hussein is dissatisfied with Margaret Thatcher’s premiership, while Omar tries to take advantage of whatever system or measures available to him.

Even though he used to be a noted social journalist in Pakistan, Hussein has been unable to find the kind of job he expected since he moved to Britain. Dissatisfied, he becomes alcoholic. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, intellectuals and journalists could hardly work independently under the regime of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistani military leader and then president. Having overthrown Bhutto's government, he introduced a policy called "Islamisation": he not only banned alcohol and encouraged workplaces to accommodate prayers but also began to censor the press and control demonstrations as a dictator ("Zia ul-Haq's legacy in Pakistan 'enduring and toxic'", para16). Under his regime, the media ceased to function and journalists were no longer able to do their own work because of authoritarian rules. Like many intellectuals at that time, Hussein lost his place in his own country. In addition, in the 1980s, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher fiercely opposed the welfare state policy, firmly believing that no one must be dependent on the welfare, and introduced neoliberal policy by enhancing the role of the private sector. Thatcher's policy benefited a part of entrepreneurs, while intellectual occupations were diminished (Barber 209-210).⁴ It was still extremely hard for immigrants to find a decent job in journalism. He no longer has a sense of belonging to Pakistan or the UK. In this film, Hussein is left behind by

Thatcher's neoliberal policy and he is truly unsatisfied with his situation in the UK. His wish to make his country better as a journalist is shattered by Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship and by the institutional racism in the UK during Thatcher's premiership. These circumstances leave him no choice but preach at his son. Hussein complains about his situation: "This damn country has done us in. That is why I am like this. We should be there. Home" (*My Beautiful Laundrette*). He goes on, "They hate us in England. And all you do is kiss their arses and think of yourself as a little Britisher" (*My Beautiful Laundrette*).

On the other hand, Omar, the second-generation British Pakistani, likely enjoys his life in the UK. He has a considerable desire to succeed in business in the UK by taking advantage of the meritocratic aspect of Thatcherite economics.⁵ Although his father Hussein likes Omar to have higher education, Omar hopes to work and make his launderette bigger, being influenced by the trend of anti-intellectualism that Thatcher's policy made. In this film, Omar is addicted to business in the UK. He always wishes to make a huge amount of money so he uses any means to succeed in his business in the UK. He never allows Johnny to rest late at night and he makes his friend work hard to make profits. To make money (to return some money to Salim), Omar could be a thief. For

instance, Omar steals Salim's drug in order to produce some money for running his laundrette.

Omar also is conscious of British social class. Rather, he chooses not to be defeated by those whites that revile and persecute British Pakistanis. When Omar brings Johnny to Nasser's house, he orders Johnny to wait outside the house. He explains the reason to Nasser's daughter this way: "He is lower class. He will not come in without being asked." (*My Beautiful Laundrette*). This scene shows that Omar has the conscious of being in middle class, although he is a British Pakistani. He also recognises Johnny as working-class. Moreover, this creates a rift between Johnny and his old friend Genghis, who says, "I am angry. I do not like to see one of our men grovelling to Pakis. They came here to work for us. That is why we brought them over" (*My Beautiful Laundrette*). Under normal circumstances, Genghis thinks, Pakistanis comes to England to work under British people, however the situation is reversed because of Thatcher's policy. In this respect, Omar adapts himself more easily to the new British meritocratic value than traditional white working-class people.

The conflict between the first generation and the second generation can be differently restaged in Nasser's family. Influenced by more liberal ideas about gender in

the UK, Nasser's daughter Tania struggles to break out of a traditional female role. In the Indian subcontinent, patriarchal traditions still prevail so greatly that girls are forced to be "proper women". As arranged marriage is still common, Nasser assumes that he can force his daughter to marry Omar. John Hill points to the significance of Tania's decision at the end of the film:

The film concludes with Tania's decision to leave the parental home. In case of Tania, her situation is also related to gender and her desire to break out of a traditional female role. In this, she is contrasted with the women of an earlier generation, not just her mother, Bilquis (Charu Baka Chokshi), who is illiterate and forced to endure her husband's infidelities but also her father's white mistress, Rachel (Shirley Anne Field), whom she berates for living off her father. In defending herself to Tania, Rachel asks her to understand how "we are of different generations, and different classes" (Hill 212)

Hill argues that Tania's decision is related to gender and her self-consciousness.

Tania is against Rachel's remark "we are of different of generations, and different classes". (*My Beautiful Laundrette*) Tania dislikes such traditional gender role as women have to bear their husband's affair and the recognition of patriarchal authority that is common in England and Pakistan. (Hill 212) In addition, Susan Torrey Barber discusses Tania's decision for her life and Tania's traditional aspect that monogamy is right.

Like her mother, Tania also tries to preserve their family unit by taunting and shaming Rachel (on the day the laundrette opens), referring to their affair as "a pretty disgusting parasitical thing." Yet Tania soon realises that her father's double standard directly impacts her life, for he intends to marry her off to Omar—the designated heir of his fortune. Disgusted with the patriarchal lineage that capitalism favours and the shame of her home life, she simply leaves her family for a more promising life on her own.

(Barber 218)

Tania has more puritanical values than her parents' generation. She has a more conservative view of interracial relationships but a more progressive view of women's

career than Nasser. In this respect, Kureishi tries to show that not every first and second-generation immigrant fits into a certain stereotypical image of his or her generation. Each individual has his or her own ideas and values regardless of his or her generation.

My Beautiful Laundrette also explores the difference within first-generation immigrants through the contrast between Hussein and Nasser. Hussein does not look like a typical Pakistani. In fact, his wife was a white woman and she was alienated from those who were around her. This led to her suicide in the end. That is one of the causes that he became alcoholic. Hussein, above all, could not adapt Thatcher's economic policy in the UK. Nasser, on the other hand, seems to be the man who can fit into the British culture, leaving a part of being a typical Pakistani. He claims, "Unlike Pakistan, [England] has not allowed religion to interfere with making money" (*My Beautiful Laundrette*) His entrepreneurship or greed makes it easy for him to adapt himself to Thatcher's policy. On the other hand, he shows the aspect that patriarchy is common sense in his family.

As Kureishi points out, none of his Asian characters may be regarded as "victims" and, in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the main Asian characters are

successful businessmen, seemingly at ease with the Thatcherite culture of enterprise, and devoted to making money by both legitimate and illegitimate means (Salim, played by Derrick Branche, deals in drugs). In this respect, a part of the film's strategy is to use the business success of the Asian characters to invert old imperial power relations. (Hill 210)

The last sentence of this statement criticises Thatcher's policy that leads to inversion of old imperial relations. In other words, this inversion was caused by Thatcher's policy, not by direct British Pakistani's action. Ironically this situation was caused by a white leader Thatcher. In the film, Omar forces Johnny to work hard as if Pakistanis avenge themselves for the past colonial rule and reverse imperial power relations.

However, this reversal of power relations did not happen to all immigrants in reality; nor did it last long enough to benefit their situation. While some succeeded financially, many still suffered from racism. Thatcher's policy is marked by her belief in capitalism and conservative values. Entrepreneurs benefited from Thatcher's meritocratic policy, and Thatcher's emphasis on meritocracy was supposed to give even immigrants a

chance of business success. At the beginning of this film, Nasser teaches Omar

In this damn country which we hate and love, you can get anything you want. It's all spread out and available. That's why I believe in England.

(My Beautiful Laundrette)

Nasser describes the UK as a little heaven. He knows that he has ambivalence to the UK that may not love him. Instead, he only loves the circumstance in which he can make a large sum of money, as everything is "available". However, that was not the case for the majority of immigrants. Racism as well as discrimination on account of religion was intensified in the 1970s and 80s. In an interview, Thatcher made a notorious observation on the situation:

But there was a committee which looked at it and said that if we went on as we are then by the century there would be four million people of the new Commonwealth or Pakistan here. Now, that is an awful lot and I think it means that with a different culture and, you know, the British character

has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in. (Qtd in Tomlinson para. 3)

In fact, Omar has a grudge against white working-class people after the Battle of Lewisham, a violent conflict that occurred in 1977. The National Front, a far-right racist group, marched in South London to “destroy” the multi-racial society. They were confronted by counter-demonstrators. This confrontation led to violent clashes. This incident points to the rise of racism as well as racial tension in the UK. In fact, such racist groups as the National Front gave vent to the frustration of a certain number of white working-class people who were left behind by Thatcher’s policy. In the film, British people such as Johnny’s friend see British Pakistanis as lower, so they complain about the fact that Johnny is forced to work under Omar.

This film not only reflects different ways of thinking and different values of two generations of Asian immigrants, but also presents a huge impact Thatcher’s policy had on the people in the UK including white British people and British Pakistanis. It focuses the impact of the policy on two generations of British Pakistanis in particular, as the

policy threw people of the same ethnic group into complete different situations. This difference is particularly huge for two first-generation immigrants, Hussein and Nasser. Even though people share racial, ethnic and other backgrounds, some can benefit from the policy like Nasser, whilst others cannot benefit from it like Hussein. Moreover, even white British people have difficulty keeping up with their country's new economic policy. This film indicates that whether one can improve the financial aspect of his or her life, including work hours, work conditions and income, depends on how much he or she adapts to new social and economic order in Thatcher's regime. Even among white people, the gap exists: there are successful men, while there are men who stay at the bottom forever like Johnny and his friends. Tania, on the other hand, is seen as the one who has different values from her parents' generation or her own generation. Her presence indicates that a person's values are not affected in a simple way by an economic situation or policy. She does not respond to the new economic and political situation as Nasser does or as Omar does. She distances herself from the situation in which certain people who succeed in business can get whatever they want, including extramarital lovers.

Chapter 3

Transformation of British Asian's Cultural Identity in *Brick Lane*

Brick Lane describes metamorphosis of British Bangladeshi's cultural identity in the post-9/11 years. In this film, three characters have changed their cultural identity for different reasons and under different circumstances. The protagonist Nazneen, who came to England at the age of 17, accepts her fate and follows the code of conduct at the beginning, while she finds her new selfhood in the end, being affected by people around her. Chanu, also a first-generation immigrant from Bangladesh, came to England in the hope of achieving great success. However, he goes back to his country at the end of the film because he finds it impossible to get a better position and lead a better life in England. Karim, a second-generation immigrant, on the other hand, transforms significantly through his experience of 9/11 in England and he ends up deciding to go to his parents' country. This chapter explores how these three characters change their cultural identity in the film *Brick Lane*.

Nazneen, the protagonist of this film, is a young first-generation immigrant from Bangladeshi. She always does nothing but accept her fate. She comes to Tower Hamlets,

London, to have an arranged marriage to Chanu, who is much older than she is. Through her experience in England, however, Nazneen has begun to acquire different values and see things from a different point of view through interacting with people around her. In the novel *Brick Lane*, Monika Ali often contrasts “images of village life from her home country” and “London streets” to remind the reader of the challenge immigrants have to overcome (Al Mamun 509). Her husband Chanu is a manipulative husband who influences the process of her self-awakening. She initially intended simply to accept her fate, as her mother told her, “We must not run from our fate, the test of life is endure” (*Brick Lane*). Although Nazneen was convinced she would not “be sent far away” (*Brick Lane*), she ends up going to the UK to live with her husband Chanu. At the very beginning of this film, Nazneen says, “I was to be grateful when father chose me an educated man living abroad” (*Brick Lane*). In fact, her father chooses Chanu as her husband. When she has sex with Chanu at the beginning, she shows no expression on her face, just recalling how life was in Bangladesh. As Chanu sees Nazneen as a typical Bangladeshi woman, he expects her to dutifully fulfill her role. Nazneen never talks back to her husband, except when he asks her a question. Even though Nazneen has migrated to England, where wives and husbands are treated more equally, she is still forced to play

a submissive and meek persona in her marital life. She keeps her head bowed down, wears a headscarf and even walks a step behind her husband (Chatrath, para 6). Chanu prohibits her to go out, except when she shops foods. His oppressiveness is more apparent in Monica Ali's original novel, *Brick Lane*.

“Why should you go out?” said Chanu. “If you go out, ten people will say,

I saw her walking on the street. And I will look like a fool.” (Ali 30)

She remains “confined to the domestic environment of the flat, as a form of purdah, which is a symbol of slavery in Islam” (Chatrath, para 4). In addition, Chanu does not allow Nazneen to work even if it is sewing at home. In the novel, Chanu explains the reason this way: “Some of these uneducated ones, they say that if the wife is working it is only because the husband cannot feed them” (Ali 147). In the film, Chanu's words are extended a little:

There are some uneducated types who believe if the wife is working it is

because the man cannot put the food on the table. Lucky your mother

married an educated man. (*Brick Lane*).

As the story progresses, Nazneen gradually starts to express her feelings and opinions to Chanu. Nazneen has been fed up with the relationship with Chanu based on patriarchal authority. She starts to sew at home to save her family life because her husband has lost his job. She is devoted to family members, especially Shahana and Bibi, more than anyone else. When Chanu finally decides to go back to Bangladesh, Nazneen expresses her desire to Chanu: "I should have said this before, I . . . This is my home. I cannot leave" (*Brick Lane*). After seeing Chanu off, she plays with children on the snow. This sequence indicates that Nazneen gets freedom and has become an independent and strong-willed woman.

Karim is another person who helps Nazneen become independent. Karim, a second-generation immigrant living in London, gets to know Nazneen as a middleman for the garment business, as she started to work as a seamstress. Despite their differences, Karim and Nazneen are gradually attracted to each other until they have an affair one day.

Although having an affair is taboo in their culture, Nazneen continues a romantic relationship with Karim as a result of her recent disillusionment with life with Chanu.

Although adultery is a sin in Islamic society, Karim does not find it “sinful” or “inappropriate” to have an adulterous relationship with Nazneen (Al Mamun 512). In the letter to Hasina, Nazneen’s sister, she confesses: “Something is happening. I know it is foolish but I cannot help it” (*Brick Lane*). When Nazneen goes out with her husband Chanu, she never listens to his talk. Instead, she is watching Karim intensely. She stands alone in front of the mirror at home with only underwear on, or without a traditional sari. As soon as her daughter Shahana comes in the room, she puts on her sari. These incidents show that her notion about love has been changing after meeting Karim. As Nazneen starts to become independent and have her own will, however, she changes her attitude to Karim. Karim expects Nazneen to divorce Chanu and wants to get married to her. Nazneen replies, “I cannot marry you. I cannot leave” (*Brick Lane*). These two sentences indicate the strength of shackles of patriarchal values from which she cannot liberate herself.

Karim also push Nazneen’s self-independence by encouraging her to voice in public. Karim invites Nazneen to the meeting of an organization for all British Muslims, and even lets Nazneen cast a vote. Karim offers Nazneen precisely what she has long wanted: voice. She is not allowed to raise a voice at home because of her authoritarian

husband, while she also feels powerless outside because of her limited knowledge of politics and her limited ability of English. Karim shows her that she can change the world by raising her voice. In other words, it is Karim who encourages her to change most.

Although Nazneen has the right to vote, she would not imagine voting on her own.

However, Karim releases her from her shut-in. In the letter to Hasina, Nazneen writes,

“Now is the time for truth. I feel as if I’m waking from a dream. The world is changing and me with it” (*Brick Lane*). This letter highlights her change or awakening caused by

what has happened to her: she feels less powerless and becomes more articulated. She

feels cut off from her former self, which seems more like a “dream” now. In this way,

Karim has huge influence on Nazneen’s self-awaking and independence.

In addition to these two men, three Bangladeshi women also play significant roles in Nazneen’s life. Her sister Hasina works as a catalyst for Nazneen’s change. They have different views of life. Though Nazneen left Bangladesh to get married to an unknown person chosen by her father, her sister Hasina chose her partner as in Western countries.

Although she is supposed to find a husband within their religious community in

Bangladesh, Hasina’s partner is a German man, according to her letter. Hasina proudly

informs Nazneen of this good news in her letter:

I have accepted a proposal from Mr Lassi, with his skins so white. People stop and stare because he is Mr Lassi and I am now his wife. I enjoyed their stares, walking arm in arm together. I'm in love. (*Brick Lane*)

This shows how ecstatic she feels when she chooses her partner at her own free will, though it is not her, but her partner who makes a proposal. She emphasizes that she is “in love”, implicitly contrasting romantic love with a loveless arranged marriage. In the novel, Hasina’s independence is underlined more clearly: “Whenever she got a letter from Hasina, for the next couple of days she imagined herself an independent woman, too” (Ali 63). Hasina’s letters help Nazneen conceive what an independent woman is like or how she should behave and make her capable of becoming an independent woman herself. Nazneen’s friend Razia also affects Nazneen’s awakening. Razia is not a typical traditional Bangladeshi woman. In spite of her several misfortunes such as her husband’s death, she lives strongly on her own. She believes that every single woman should have a job. She inspires Nazneen to work as a seamstress. Finally, Nazneen’s daughter Shahana, who has never been to Bangladesh, inadvertently encourages Nazneen to be more

independent. Born and bred in the UK, Shahana speaks English with a British accent, not Bengali. Her cultural identity is decidedly British. She is often confronted with her father Chanu, but she is never afraid of speaking back to him. She also urges Nazneen to say to Chanu what she wants to do, even though he does not like her to. Shahana says to Chanu on her behalf:

She's been married to you for nearly 20 years. And in all my life, Amma, I have never heard you say what you want. Please, Amma. Tell him. Tell him, Amma. Please, for once. Please, tell him. Please, Amma, tell him you don't want to go. Just tell him you don't want to go. Tell him. Please. Please Amma. You're pathetic. Bangladesh is gone. It's another time.

(Brick Lane)

In this scene, Shahana not only expresses her mother's strong will not to go back to Bangladesh on her behalf but also asserts that the kind of Bangladesh that her parents, especially Chanu, cherish does not exist any longer. Instead of trying to hurt Chanu's feelings, she tries to express her opinion at her strong will. It is the first time for Nazneen

to see such younger women behave like that. Shahana expresses what Nazneen has been only subconsciously aware of. Nazneen is more or less affected by such an attitude of hers.

Nazneen's husband Chanu, on the other hand, has not changed his cultural identity throughout the film. Dissatisfied with life in England, Chanu has gradually begun to retreat into nostalgia and entertain a strong desire to go back to Bangladesh. He is an educated and knowledgeable man boasting of his collection of books. Chanu shows off his knowledge to his family when they go to the Buckingham palace. When Bibi asks him about promotion, Chanu responds, "Very likely, very likely. I said to him, they need an educated man like me" (*Brick Lane*). Chanu is very proud of his talent and confident in success in Britain. However, Chanu has gradually realized that it is quite difficult for him to succeed in England. In the novel, Chanu describes his situation in the UK

When I came I was a young man. I had ambitions. Big dreams. When I got off the plane, I had my degree certificate in my suitcase. 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. That was my plan.

And I found things were a bit different. (Ali 21)

Sadly, he could only afford a cheap flat at the Tower Hamlets for his wife Nazneen and his children Shahana and Bibi. For sixteen years, he has lived in Britain and still cannot get well-paid job. Against his expectation, Chanu does not get a promotion and loses his job. Chanu's situation is summed up in the sentence "He was sorry he was losing a good man" (*Brick Lane*). Since the economic and political situation in his country has not been good, he came to England. However, he could not get the job that he expected.

Furthermore he owes big amount of money from a usurer. This worst situation leads Chanu to decide to go back to his country.

Confrontations with his wife and daughter, as well as handling changing situations at once strengthen his wish to go back to Bangladesh and propel him to achieve emotional maturity. Chanu is extremely proud of his country and its culture and religion. Chanu strongly believes in the old-fashioned patriarchy, so he does not want Nazneen to work. He forces his wife to be a traditional woman and do some feminine chores for him. He

discourages her from integrating into society, also discourages his daughters from becoming too westernized because he wants to keep their Bengali culture rooted within themselves. In the film, Chanu and Shahana have quarrels:

Chanu: From now on, no one speaks English.

Chanu: I will not allow this happen. To learn manners and to respect her father. (*Brick Lane*)

Shahana speaks back to him:

Shahana: I didn't ask to be born here. You're always encouraging us to fit in. It worked, we do fit in. You're the one who's stuck somewhere, Abba. (*Brick Lane*)

Chanu always emphasizes the importance of Bengali culture and custom. When the Bengal Tiger's meeting after 9/11 is held, Chanu expresses his own negative view of Islamic fundamentalism. There he proudly says, pointing to his heart, "My Islam is here

and it's the only thing worth defending" (*Brick Lane*). In the meeting, Chanu finds it strange to see young men like Karim becoming radicalized. Chanu disagrees with such young men's attitude for being more than revolutionary. He claims that their faith should be in their mind; and that otherwise, war could happen. After 9/11, Chanu tries to hasten back to his country, Bangladesh. Surprisingly, Chanu encourages Nazneen to take more sewing to get more money to earn travel expenses. Chanu has intended to go back with his family. However, his family wish to stay in England. Chanu is strongly opposed to the idea but Shahana unreservedly insists they should stay. Nazneen also starts to express herself in an articulated manner. As a result, Chanu decides to leave alone. At the end of the film, Chanu cheerfully says to his family, "There has been a change of plan. The three of you come later" (*Brick Lane*). He continues to say some jokes, "Don't you know? I'm a better cook than your mother. Do as your mother tells you" (*Brick Lane*). This dialogue from the last scene shows the viewer that Chanu has changed from a stubborn Bangladeshi into "a good father". As a matter of fact, he is well educated and has good characteristic and takes pride in being Bangladeshi. He did not change his cultural identity as other people around him did so that he decides to go back to his country in the end.

Consequences of tragic events that happened in New York on 11 September 2001, commonly abbreviated as 9/11, radically change Karim's cultural identity. Being a second-generation British Bangladesh born and bred in the UK, Karim has never been to Bangladesh. Unlike Shahana's and Bibi's, Karim's identity as British is not firmly rooted; he feels alienated from white British in the end. Karim wears jeans and sneakers at the beginning. He also builds a romantic relationship with Nazneen, sharing their feelings, until they become lovers. On the other hand, he fights against racism from white people, especially members of the Lion Hearts, an anti-immigration, racist organization. In the film, members of the Lion Hearts hurl racist abuses around the Tower Hamlets: "Go home, you fucking Pakis" (*Brick Lane*). Faced with this backlash, the Muslim community sometimes has meetings to tackle the problem. They form an organization called Bengal Tigers to fight the Lion Hearts. Karim says, "This community has been talking shit from people the Lion Hearts. I suggest we call ourselves Bengal Tigers" (*Brick Lane*). It is precisely then that 9/11 terror attacks happen in New York. The tragic event changes Karim's perspective more radically. After this catastrophe, racist attacks by the Lion Hearts boost, as racist attacks increased in reality.⁶ Members of the Lion Hearts shout,

“Go! Go! You fucking terrorists! Get out. Go back to your own country” (*Brick Lane*). A

TV reporter reports:

This has been a year of racial tension in Britain, with race riots in the north.

The fear is now that in the last seven days, “Muslim” has become a dirty

word. (*Brick Lane*)

The last sentence of this report emphasises that “Muslim” has become the word that

people hesitate to use since the attacks happened. Aggressive feelings against terrorists

are channelled to Muslim people as a result. Also, Karim describes the situation this way:

Some white boy goes and pulls my cousin’s hijab down in the street today.

Things are changing. The way people look at you now on the streets—so

much mistrust. (*Brick Lane*)

He experiences racism and encounters unabashed racists. Although he has very limited

knowledge of Islam, he feels more attached to Islam than white people’s secularism just

because he feels alienated from predominantly white Britain. In his attempt to fight racism, he has become militant and radicalised.

Out there are people twisted with hatred for us and Islam. We've become victims but not for long. We stand arm in arm with our Muslims brothers ready to defend. (*Brick Lane*)

Karim sees himself and other Muslims as victims. Karim sums up the situation, by putting emphasis on religion, as if every Christian is evil and every Muslim is just. He justifies attacks against white under the pretext of "defending" them from threats. In this respect, Karim has been transformed from a common British Asian into a radicalized Muslim youth. He stops wearing jeans and sneakers and starts wearing traditional Bangladeshi clothes. Infuriated by the racial tension and increasing racist attacks by white people, he gradually loses his romantic attachment to Nazneen. In the end, he goes back to Bangladesh after obtaining his identity as radicalized Muslim youth. He decides to go back to the Muslim country to enforce his identity.

Brick Lane provides intersections of three different lives and different perspectives. Its focus is on Nazneen's transformation. She gets a new social and cultural identity as an independent woman through her interaction with Karim and experience as a mother. She is confronted with other people such as her husband, lover and daughters, as well as their perspectives which are totally different from hers. In addition to this experience, she goes through the social upheavals. All this contributes to her metamorphosis. By contrast, two male characters change in rather negative ways. Since he resists changing his cultural affiliation, Chanu sticks to his old cultural identity and ends up going back to his country. Influenced by 9/11, Karim acquires a new social and cultural identity as a radicalised Muslim youth that is widely considered undesirable and anti-social. In this respect, three characters articulate their own identity through their interaction with people around them and post-9/11 experience. Ironically, it is Nazneen, apparently the most powerless of the three, who learns most and reaches emotional maturity after the turmoil after 9/11.

Conclusion

In all three chapters, we have discussed the ways British films represent various factors contributing to the construction and transformation of British Asians' cultural identity. All those British Asian characters are diverse in terms of their cultural identity. First-generation immigrants tend to be portrayed stereotypically, but things are not as simple as they may seem. Jess's parents in *Bend It Like Beckham* are stereotypical British Indians stuck to their "home" culture, while Hussein and Nasser are not, Hussein has no place for him in his country and England because of both policy of Zia-ul-Haq and Thatcher, whereas Jess's parents have steady place in England. As for Nasser, he fits in the rare case that he benefits from Thatcher's policy in terms of business situation. Compared with Nasser, Jess's parents believe that they should value traditional and steady jobs. Second-generation immigrants are differently portrayed, too. Jess, Tania and Karim respond to their parents or their parent's generation very differently. Jess believes that co-existence of parent country's cultural identity and British culture, while Tania seeks completely to break out of a traditional female role. On the other hand, Karim's belief as a radicalized Muslim youth is transformed from an Asian British and enforced by the

tragedy 9/11. Also, Nazneen is different from all the others because she changes or grows up mentally in the film. Nazneen, who used to believe that she should follow by her fate and be traditional proper woman, has changed her cultural identity through interacting people around her. She finally has become independent woman and got strong will. Our findings can be summed up as follows. Chapter 1 focuses on generation as a key factor of creating difference between first-generation British Asians and second-generation British Asians in terms of their cultural identity. Their difference is encapsulated in the relationship between the heroine and her traditional parents. The parents' final decision to respect their daughter's choice to be a professional football player proves the co-existence of the values of parents' "home" country and those of their host country. Chapter 2 cites various factors including Thatcherism in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. In this film, three characters show different responses to changing political and economic situations after Thatcher's premiership. First-generation British Asians Hussein and Nasser respond to Thatcherism differently. Whilst an ex-journalist Hussein has no place because of Zia-ul-Haq's policy and Thatcherism, Nasser benefits from the latter policy. Also, Omar is not a typical young Asian obsessed with white British culture. His experience of white riots as well as his homosexuality makes him different from stereotypes. He also enjoys

his business in the UK as Nasser does under meritocratic policy. The final chapter discusses an equally nuanced approach to this theme in *Brick Lane*. In this film, three characters, different in generation and sex, reach different conclusions through their interaction with others, unemployment and white backlash after 9/11. While Nazneen has found her identity as independent woman interacting people around her, her husband Chanu ends up going back to his country as a result of his failure to find a job suitable for his qualifications. Karim has been affected 9/11 and he has transformed into a radicalized Muslim youth.

British films have explored the theme of cultural identity among British Asians in various ways we have examined. We have cited such key factors as changing cultural identity, transforming it, forcing it. Films such as *Bend It Like Beckham* sum up this theme as a comedy of generation gap, which is acceptable to anyone. On the other hand, films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Brick Lane* present the complexity of this theme. These tendencies may remain in British films in the next decades, although they may be changed significantly. As *My Beautiful Laundrette* chronicles changes within British community after Thatcherism, equally significant changes may take place in British Asian community after Brexit. As *Brick Lane* chronicles changes within British

Asian community after 9/11, similar changes may hit British Asian community as consequences of this ongoing “endless war” of “global civil war”. In this respect, British films will continue to be the mirror held up to their reality faced by British Asians.

Although what British films portray in terms of transition in British society may not be reality, they will have continuously portrayed such British Asian’s cultural identity in accordance with transformation in the UK.

Notes

¹ According to Sakuma, the first generation immigrants from the Indian subcontinent tend to retain their own cultural tradition, even if it is outdated or outlawed in Britain (Sakuma 82). Although the Sikhs are allegedly less class-bound and more liberal about gender than the Hindi, the Sikhs like Jess's family of this film also try to preserve their traditional class distinction within a gurdwara as well as their traditional gender roles (Sakuma 82).

² Sakuma argues that second-generation immigrants already develop their relationships in England. That influences their lifestyle and culture (Sakuma 103). According to Triseliotis, English-born children of immigrant origins feel more akin to other schoolchildren, regardless of ethnic origins (Triseliotis 108).

³ According to Sakuma, the arranged marriage has been obsolete since second-generation immigrants reached the age of consent for marriage because of their greater exposure to British culture through their advanced English ability, educational background and leisure activities. In fact, many immigrants who grew up in England got divorced from men who live in India (Sakuma 109).

⁴ Jenkins and Welch sum up this situation succinctly: "Mrs Thatcher, in her headlong pursuit of the conservative revolution and the reform of Britain's ancient institutions, could not rest the possibility of disinheritance those she and her acolytes came increasingly to regard as the 'chattering classes' an intellectual establishment that in their view, dominated Britain's universities, arts world, civil service, higher journalism, the

BBC, and even the Church of England” (Jennings and Kemp-Welch 3).

⁵ Thatcher put emphasis on meritocracy in pursuit of economic growth.

According to Thatcher, individuals should not be living by relying on others or the government, they have to walk and live on their own (Ogawa 12).

⁶ According to an article of *Daily Telegraph* on 28 May 2014, racial prejudice in Britain has risen steadily in the decade since the 9/11 terror attacks. Nearly a third of Britons described themselves as either “very” or “a little” prejudiced against people of other races in the NatCen British Social Attitudes survey for 2013.

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