

From Xenophobia to Enlightenment amidst Transculturation: Rereading of Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen*

Abdur Rajjak

(M.A., M. Phil., NET, SET)

Former M. Phil. Scholar

The University of Gour Banga, India

DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2020.5.5.15

Abstract

The chronicle of human migration is as old as human civilization which goes back to prehistoric time when it started flourishing in ancient Africa. The main cause behind such migrations is to have a greater opportunity for life which enfolds economic, political, social and demographic factors. But, in the course of time, the immigration has gradually become a challenging issue since it has deep-rooted connection with culture and identity. The entire process involves alienation, loss, anxiety, insecurity in the minds of the immigrants as well as the indigenous people. The present study will showcase the effect of globalization and modernization on the nations and their subjects keeping in mind the burning issue of immigration across the globe. In order to have a better understanding of one's individuation process, the present paper will address sociological, psychological, and multicultural issues against the backdrop of xenophobia as depicted by Monica Ali in her third novel *In the Kitchen*. But the main focus of the present study is to demonstrate how it affects and helps in rebuilding the identity of those belonging originally to the homeland.

Keywords- Migration, Culture, Identity, Globalization, Modernization, Xenophobia

Introduction

With the advent of globalization, everything is changing drastically due to the unprecedented progress and development in every sphere of life including science, technology, information and communication. Hence, geographical distance has now merely become a trivial factor as an individual from any corner of the world can easily communicate with rest of the people on the surface of this planet. Therefore, a person can easily decide what to take from other culture and what to reject. In this way, we can infer that globalization is not simply a system of homogenization rather it's a gateway of coming closer which ultimately gives birth to a new kind of mechanism of identity. But when an individual or a group of people migrated to a new cultural as well as geographical location they have

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

to have some kind of cultural assimilation. As a result of diversification of cultures, ethnicity and nationality, an individual becomes conscious of his 'own' identity and is often in search of his 'origin'. This is true both for the indigenous and immigrant people alike. Both of the groups are eager to preserve and defend the uniqueness of their culture, and look at the other apprehensively. Since the powerful section of the society can manipulate social system, their perspectives transmit easily across the world through the mass media. Hence, there is always an invisible conflict between the dominant section of people and that of the dominated.

Although the world in the era of globalization has accomplished innumerable advancement in the fields of science and technology, there are still plenty of humanitarian crises which are now attracted serious attention of the experts and thinkers from different disciplines. The discipline of English literary study is no exception since it is known as a mirror of human society itself. A number of writers from this discipline try to address the issue through their writings from different perspectives. Writers from South-Asian origin have been able to secure their own position in dealing with the various aspects of the subject that includes human identity, cultural barrier, values, and socio-economic condition and so on. Some of the prominent figures are Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Vikram Chandra, Daniyal Mueenuddin, Mohsin Hamid, Arundhoty Roy, Michael Ondaatje, Monica Ali, Tahmima Anam etc. Monica Ali is one of the dominant South Asian writers who have drawn the attention of the international literary critics by depicting the pictures of the immigrants and their displacement in a multicultural society. She was born to a Bangladeshi father and an English mother, and was ultimately taken to England when she was only three years old. She was an alumna of Wadham College, Oxford from where she obtained PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics) degree. Being brought up as an immigrant in a multicultural society she became familiar with people of different race, ethnicity, cultures, and tribes. Her experiences of the surroundings have greatly influenced her world of imagination as well as her writings. But her range of depiction goes beyond her ethnic identity though she was successful in gaining name and fame with her maiden novel *Brick Lane* (2003). Instead of becoming a representative of her ethnic community her literary endeavour covers up a wider zone in representing the immigrants from different origin in different settings. For example in her second novel *Alentejo Blue* (2006) she introduces different ethnic groups in a remote area of Portugal; her third novel *In the Kitchen* (2009) gives a detailed description of immigrants from different countries and the inhuman treatment they receive in England. In all of them she proves herself to be a successful novelist of the multicultural society. The present paper will explore different aspects of the immigrant experiences and will address xenophobic and racist mentality of the people

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

of Britain as portrayed in *In the Kitchen*. At the same time, it is willing to analyse and inspect individuation process of the protagonist from an egoistic person to a generous and kind hearted one who, at the later point of the novel, is seen to dedicate all his energy and enthusiasm in the pursuit of rescuing humanitarian dignity that gradually dwindles away due to the emergence of complexities of the new world order. Furthermore, the present paper will explore how the longstanding concept of nation-state gradually loses its significance as a consequence of globalization and immigration overseas. Above all, present study will utilize psychoanalytical criticism, orientalism, post-colonialism and critical race theory to drive home conclusion.

Discussion

The protagonist, Gabriel Lightfoot (better known as Gabe) in *In the Kitchen* is introduced as an executive chef of the Imperial Hotel in London. He is originally from a small mill town of northern England. He always nourishes and nurtures his dream to become an owner of a restaurant in London. That's why he is conscious and careful to materialize his dream and doesn't bother about others. But the sudden demise of his subordinate worker Yuri comes as a bolt from the blue to him since this compels him to get engaged with the unexpected incident. Now he tries to remember the last hours when he was having conversation with the porter. He is unable to get rid of the terrific sight where Yuri's dead body was lying on the pool of blood. This pathetic scene frequently hackles his mind which has morphed into a certain type of traumatic experience. The trauma of Yuri's death in the words of Cathy Caruth "is borne by an accident of departure ...which ... remains at the same time in some sense absolutely opaque..." (190). This causes restlessness in one's mind and becomes more intensified and complicated at every moment. Gabe becomes the victim of such complexities and starts thinking that he is responsible for the pathetic death of Yuri in some way or the other.

If one goes through the present novel, one can easily understand how the workers in the Imperial Hotel are emotionally detached from each other though they have been working together under the same roof. That's why when the police came for investigation nobody can provide any information about his background. Gabe was asked about Yuri, he even failed to provide additional information about the porter except the file that he had been handed over to him by the recruiting agency. This is, indeed, one of the major impacts of modernity in the age of science and technology. In this context we may agree with Bruno Latour who has aptly commented that, "[T]here exists no society to begin with, no reservoir of ties, no big assuring pot of glue to keep all... together" (Reassembling the Social 37). Everything is treated here from commercial point of view, and capitalistic attitude encourages one to excel others even by depriving them their due rights. This

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

comes to the forefront when Gabriel is seen to ponder on the expertise and knowledge of his late fellow Mr. Yuri and how his absence has created a huge vacuum in the hotel. Unfortunately, it would be a difficult task to find even a slightest ray of human compassion in Gabe's tone for his dead fellow. Jessica Byron has rightly commented that, "Globalization has been characterized tremendous human mobility by... economic deprivation for many, conflicts and social turmoil, natural and man-made disasters" (98).

Despite Imperial Hotel has become recognized as a centre for the people of multicultural background, Gabe had hardly any opportunity to become a part of such mixed society in his childhood. Therefore, such an ambience appears to him as an unnatural combination of peoples. When he thinks of his familiarity with the people from different nationality, he can remember about some Pakistani nationals who used to live in the nearby area of their residence but he never ventured to meet them as he was strictly prohibited from his family to do so. Besides, they used to work in the night shift and took rest by the day. As a result he did not get a chance to have a conversation with them. Gabe's father used to say about his neighbour that he was in miserable situation both financially and economically due to his connection with the Asiatic people since they believed them to be evil and inferior ones. He also remembers the bus conductors who used to shout 'Khyber Pass' and passengers could easily associated it with the Asiatic people. This is a pejorative term for the people of Asiatic origin, and they had created a negative image of others who were from different nationalities. In this context we may invoke the authority of Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic who once claimed, "...by every social indicator, racism continues to blight the lives of people of color, including holders of high-echelon jobs, even judges" (12). Therefore, this is a matter of grave concern. In fact, this was a device of the Orientalists who claimed their superiority over the others by presenting a negative portrayal of them. In this connection we can relate this to Edward Said who claimed:

One cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. (*Orientalism* 3)

As has already been indicated, modern scientific development in the era of globalization has now become a great barrier to maintain the uniqueness of one's identity. In the present novel one can find a sense of alienation harbours in the mind of Gabe though belongs to his homeland since he does not find any connection with the present surroundings of London. He realizes that he has been

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

marginalized. The main cause behind his marginalized position in his own country is his gradual defamiliarization with the socio-cultural atmosphere. Besides, his fear has its direct link with a xenophobic sentiment that he has inherited from familial background and surrounding atmosphere. In this connection we may invoke the authority of Oksana Yakushko who has rightly observed, “Current news media are filled with stories in which recent immigrants are denigrated, belittled, and discriminated against” (Xenophobia 30). Interestingly enough, if anyone observes closely Gabe’s behavior one can easily conceive that he has no intention to discriminate among the workers of the hotel on the basis of race and ethnicity rather he takes pride on the fact that his hotel has an entrepot of multicultural people, therefore he invites his father to visit the hotel which is a common platform for every nation. But his father disapproves this by declaring it’s an act of getting pleasure without proper sense of responsibility. As a result of this, Gabe starts to isolate himself from his coworkers in the hotel instead of coming closer and getting familiarized with them. In the course of his discussion with Fairweather, a parliamentarian about the ongoing situations in and around London, he feels a strange kind of pang in his stomach. He gradually realizes that his pain is not coming from hunger but it’s a result of his isolation which gradually becomes more solidified and intensified. He seems to be unfamiliar in his surrounding atmosphere and he is dislocated from the homeland:

London wasn’t the brain of the country, as people said; it certainly wasn’t the heart. London was all belly, its looping, intestinal streets constantly at work, digesting, absorbing, excreting, fuelling and refueling, shaping the contours of the land. (*In the Kitchen* 309)

Being isolated in the hotel, Gabe is totally unaware of the activities of human trafficking that have long been taking place at the hotel premises. Now he realizes that some of the members of the hotel either directly or indirectly involved in such inhuman practices since he notices certain type of suspicious manner in their behaviour. So, he needs to become cautious and careful about their activity as it might bring about threatening consequences. Since the sole objective in his life was to establish himself as an owner of a reputed restaurant at the heart of London, he was not curious to know the whereabouts of his co-workers. Subsequently, he fails to apprehend the real reason of the chaotic situation in the hotel premises as well as within himself. Internally, he seems to blame himself for the premature and unexpected death of the porter despite the fact that he cannot be held responsible for the sudden demise of the porter. His conscience severely begins to torment him, and this is the turning point in his life from where he also begins to concentrate on the activities of the people around him. Although he wants to remain indifferent his transformation from a self-centred person to a compassionate one commences at this juncture of his life. Gabe comes to know from his

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

parliamentarian friend (Mr. Fairweather) about the pathetic condition of labourers. He informs Gabe that on many occasions the parliament tried to put an end to exploitation of the labourers but every effort remained unsuccessful to materialize the same into reality. The parliament even brought a bill called Gangmaster Licensing Act to eradicate such inhuman torture but it was hardly effective in reality.

In the process of Gabe's transformation from xenophobic person to an emancipated being, the contribution and influences of three female characters (i.e. Lena, Charlie and Oona) are worthy to mention. The most influential among them is Lena who happens to meet Gabe after the sudden decease of Yuri. She comes to Gabe to have a shelter though her arrival proves to be a boon in disguise for Gabe. In fact, she acts as a catalyst in the transformation of Gabe by becoming an eye-opener to him. It is through her, he becomes aware of the illegal activities that have long been happening in and around the hotel and she was actually a prime victim of human trafficking. It is in this connection Michael Shively reminds us, "Women and girls drawn or forced into prostitution typically are economically and emotionally vulnerable" (11). According to the narrative of the present novel, Lena used to live with Yuri in the hotel premises to keep herself away from the pimp. She is, in fact, a Belarusian who came to London with the intention of getting some job for her livelihood. Unfortunately, she had been abducted by the pimp, Boris. Once he forgot to lock the door and by taking advantage of this situation Lena ran away from there to get rid of this ignoble life. She happened to meet a Ukrainian woman who gave her shelter to stay with her, and managed get a job in the café. When she saw Boris in the café, she again became afraid of becoming captured by Boris since she had firsthand experience of their ferocious grips. In this respect we may keep in mind a survey published in *American Journal of Public Health* that, "Nearly all the women and adolescent girls (95%) reported physical and sexual violence while in trafficking situation" (56). The Ukrainian woman, therefore, handed over her to the porter, Yuri who knew every corner of the hotel. Naturally after the death of Yuri she becomes shelterless and is doomed to a life wretchedness and enslavement.

The turbulent situations compelled Lena to approach Mr. Gabe because he seemed to be the most reliable person in hotel and asked for his help in lieu of physical relationship with her. But Gabe did not grab this opportunity as it was beneath his dignity but he readily offered her shelter. The only advantage that he gained from her is the information about the illegal activities of the underground. In the course of her staying with Gabe, she introduces the name of her brother Pasha to him, and often requests him to find his brother out so that they can get united once again. At this stage, Gabe is gradually seen to be very eager in coming out of the cocoon of complacency and compromise. In view

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

of keeping her request, he once decides to go to Norfolk along with the immigrant workers who later on happen to be his coworkers. He becomes startled when he finds that the minibus in the farm is the same one stolen from the Imperial Hotel. Therefore, he becomes sure that there must be some kind of link between the hotel of which he is executive chief and the farm where the immigrants are forced to work in lieu of low wage. Here he witnesses how they have been deprived by taking away their valid documents and the looted money directly reached to the individuals or authority engaged in human trafficking. This reminds us of a report by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime that such activities are taking place because of the involvement of several the beneficiaries (both local and transnational) that include “Corrupt immigrant officials, consular workers, embassy personnel, members of law enforcement bodies and border guards” (96).

When Gabe’s transformation reaches its zenith he is determined in bringing to the limelight the plight of the immigrant labourers. Therefore, he freely mixes up with his coworkers at Nut Tree Farm so that he can manage to gather additional information about the oppression and exploitation of these immigrant labourers. His heart becomes full of sorrow when he compares his life with that of those labourers. Gabe is unable remain silent after witnessing such oppression against humanity. When he protests, he has been threatened by Tymon, an attendant of the boss of the farm. He even warns that Gabe will be rusticated if he does not refrain from his protest, and finally he is compelled to leave the farm. Although he is unsuccessful in his attempt to make Lena and Pasha united, he easily finds out the nexus between his hotel and the farm of Norfolk. He starts thinking that such system are nothing but a new of slavery and should be do away with all together for sustainable development of the society, and the humanity at large. In his search for exposing the gruesome reality of human trafficking, Gabe comes to know that three of his colleagues (i.e. Gleeson, Ivan, and Branka) are involved in human trafficking. Ivan works as a mediator in buying and selling the girls of various ages in accordance with the demand of different bars and hotels. Gleeson produces photos of girls before the customers and selects girls according to the need of the customers whereas Branka keeps the girls in his care and supplies them to the customers when needed. In this way the hotel has long been used by this evil trio as a platform to carry on their heinous activities in a massive way. Hence, Gabe realizes the whole atmosphere of London has changed both internally and externally but he had hardly any idea about the occurrence of such things. He is now more restless ever than before since the naked truth dawns upon him. This realization starts tormenting him bitterly and he starts collapsing psychologically. He begins to question himself about the relevance his existence on the surface of this

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

planet. He gradually becomes impatient since he is unable to get suitable answers to the questions preoccupied in his mind. He questions himself in the following way:

What am I? he thought. What am I? The question pinged round and round plaintively until, fitting faster and faster, it took on a sharper edge. What am I? What am I? A nobody? A nothing? A zero? Am I a hollow man? (*In the Kitchen* 478)

Now, Gabe treats himself to be a worthless fellow who seems to possess no positive quality in him. He becomes relentless and very much eager to know how others look at him. When Benny is asked by Gabe to say something about him only in three words, Benny describes him as “tall, white and male” (*In the Kitchen* 480). Gabe thinks that this is not satisfactory answer and immediately gets collapsed. When he gets back his consciousness, he becomes more impatient to have adequate assessment of himself. He now realizes that is only Charlie, his girl friend who can precisely describe him. Charlie says that he is self-obsessed, selfish and unreliable fellow with pig-like head. At this he comes to know the main reason behind his isolation is his selfish attitude towards others. At one point Gabe seems to have lost everything he has possessed especial after the separation from Charlie. That’s why he does not want to lose further; therefore, he does not want to spend more time with others. The only thing he wants to contact with Charlie and restart their usual relationship. During Gabe’s tenure at the farm of Norfolk, the image of Oona, a Jamaican national (who was a skilled worker of the Imperial hotel) used to haunt his mind. He visualizes that she is laughing in front of him and exposes her golden teeth. Although her presence itself used to irritate him in London, his general dislike of her seemed to disappear totally from his mind. Her image appeared to be an object of solace to him and she served as his guide in the onion farm where the immigrants were exploited and deprived of their legal rights. Although he personally didn’t have any negative view of her, some of her activities used to irritate him since in her behaviour he could see some characteristics of homeliness which he tried to avoid since he liked to isolate himself from others. In the farm he felt her absence and was unable to justify his indifference to her:

Was he so different from Oona? Had he fallen out of love with food? It was all these numbers and forms, the meetings, the health and safety procedures, the staff of problems, the countless emails. No wonders the passion waned now and again. (*In the Kitchen* 103)

After the passage of time there have been a lot of changes in the attitude of Gabe. He is now eager to know the ground reality of everything around him. When Benny, a close fellow of Gabe relates the story of a professor from Congo, Gabe is very much curious to know the plight of him; therefore, he encourages Benny to carry on with the story. The professor used to teach economics at

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

the University of Kinshasa, and his only fault was his involvement in the opposition politics. In this way he became a victim of the ruling party that resulted in his imprisonment. In the prison house most of his teeth were extracted, and thereafter he was not tortured any more. But when he went home after his release he came to know that all his family members were slaughtered by the state authority. Discovering himself in this helpless situation he immediately decides to leave his native land permanently. Initially he went to Zambia after that he came to Britain to avoid further prosecution of the authoritarian regime. This story of the professor helps him come out of the artificial barriers created by the supremacy of the Orientalists and be sympathetic towards his coworkers by forgetting his own interests and sufferings. Gradually, he comes to know that Benny is actually from Liberia and he fled the country when there was a civil war in Liberia. He narrates the story to Gabe how he along with some others went straight to Cairo since they heard about kindhearted treatment of the Egyptian authority towards the Liberian. Two years later when he was interviewed by officials of the United Nations he was offered to settle in London. But, as has already been noted, Gabe's biased attitude had a direct connection with his family members who happen to be xenophobic in nature. That's why his Nana did not like Gabe's hotel where people from foreign nations are working together. She is indeed racist in mentality and speaks of Gabe's hotel as "an attic which is full of Pakistans" (*In the Kitchen* 212).

In the meanwhile, Gabe is eager to play a decisive role in restoring human dignity and prestige since he is able to respond to the call of his reawakened conscience. Therefore, when he discusses with his girlfriend about the overall problems of the British, he confesses that they too have same weaknesses as other nations. People are opportunistic in their belief in God. They are selfish in their relationship with others. They often blame others for their retrogression. Gabe agrees that their internal problems outweigh their external ones. Charlie also confesses that "we are our worst enemies" (*In the Kitchen* 190). This can be treated as a direct outcome of Gabe's unprejudiced and non-discriminatory attitudes which reflect the magnanimity of Gabe's heart. He is now proud of becoming an upholder of multicultural values. He defends the ongoing trend of the arrival of the immigrants since 'tolerance' and 'fair play' are of the two essential ingredients of Britishness. He asks his father to change his standpoint about the immigrants who are in no way hindering the progress of the British society and its progress gets intensified instead. As the participation of the non-British people in the development of society is commendable, their contribution should be given due recognition. Being enlightened, he strongly protested against the biased attitude of his family towards the non-native dwellers of United Kingdom. He is in way ready to believe that they are on the verge

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

of identity crisis due to the presence immigrant. Rather, he opines the main beauty of British culture is its positive attitude towards others and the “great thing about London... was that everyone was just a Londoner. The city bound everyone together or kept them equally apart” (*In the Kitchen* 222).

Conclusion

In fine, it can be conferred that entire narrative of the present novel revolves around the theme of individual’s quest for identity against the backdrop of multiculturalism and global immigration. Monica Ali utilizes the protagonist as her mouthpiece to convey the message that one should have conviction in his own self and should not lose trust in humanity irrespective of class, creed, culture, ethnicity, and nationality. This is, indeed, a spiritual journey of Gabe from the abysmal of faithlessness to an elevated state of firm conviction in his own-self and the entire humanity as well. This is reflected in the words of Monica Ali herself when she was interviewed by a certain gentleman of BookBrowse regarding the protagonist of the present novel, “At the core of this journey are faith, hope and love. In the beginning he lacks faith in anyone or anything, including himself, but he finds ultimately a faith in humanity”. Therefore, Gabe is now seen to have a firm resolution to sacrifice the rest part of his life in the cause of humanity since he is able to lay behind the shell of white supremacist mentality. He now realizes that they should have proper life planning for future, and their works should be motivated by generosity. He is trying to do away with all the barriers that separated him from the common people. He has now adopted a philanthropic view instead of his former biased Eurocentric point of view. He seems to be inspired by the mantra, “the entire world is a family”(translated by Jeffrey Moses, the Maha Upanishad) and is able to have a taste ‘inner peace’ in the orthodox sense of the term with having no apprehension of losing the uniqueness of his ‘identity’ and ‘prestige’.

Works-Cited

Ali, Monica. *In the Kitchen*. Transworld Publishers, 2009.

---, “An Interview with Monica Ali.” *Book Browse*. Web. 21 July 2020.

www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/935/monica-ali

Byron, Jessica. “The Contemporary Crisis in Globalization and its impact on Latin America with special reference to the Caribbean region of Latin America.” Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies/ U of West Indies, 2016, pp. 97 – 106.

Caruth, Cathy. “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History. The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

- Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York UP, 2017. P
- Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford UP, 2005.
- Moses, Jeffrey. *Oneness*. Random House Publishing, 2002, pp. 12.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Penguin, 1978.
- Shively, Michael. "A National Overview of Prostitution and Sex Trafficking Demand Reduction Efforts." *The National Institute of Justice*. U S Department of Justice, 2012.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes. *An Introduction to Human Trafficking: Vulnerability, Impact and Action*. Viena, 2008.
- Yakushko, Oksana. "Xenophobia: Understanding the Roots and Consequences of Negative Attitudes towards the Immigrants." *The Counseling Psychologist* 37.1 (2009). pp 36 – 66. Web. 17 Dec 2020.
- Zimmerman, Cathy. et al. The Health of Trafficked Women: A Survey of Women Entering Posttrafficked Services in Europe. *American Journal of Public Health*. 98.1 (2008). pp 55-59. Web. 18 Nov 2020.