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MULTI / INTER-CULTURALISM AND GROUP ACTIVITY IN MONICA ALI'S <u>BRICK LANE</u>

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Abstract: The cultural turn of translation studies of the '70s – '80s placed 'culture' in the core of these studies and transformed the idea of culture. One may understand culture as the Culture (singular) – 'what all human beings have in common as cultural beings or language animals' – or as 'pluralized Cultures' – 'what makes us different' (Cronin, 2006). The meaning of 'cultural translation' that I embraced myself is the one offered by Harish Trivedi in his article, Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation: cultural translation does not refer to the translation of one or more cultures, but it shows the 'erasure of translation as we have always known and practiced it' (Trivedi, 2007).

Keywords: multiculturalism, interculturalism, ethnic group, conflict

1. INTRODUCTION

This analysis basically starts from the encounter between the West and the East, reflected by the main environment of the novel itself, Brick Lane, a street in the East End of London, now known as Banglatown, as it is mainly inhabited by the Bangladeshi-Sylheti community. This encounter may be seen as a continuous conflict between different cultures or a clash between cultures, or as a continuous negotiation, with 'winners' and 'losers' who exchange places when one expects it the least. It is a conflict that takes up different forms: sometimes it is either an open conflict, when two different groups attack one another, or, most of the times, it is an unspoken interior conflict that manifests itself within one individual with one hybrid identity. There is still another type of conflict, between members of the same community or even of the same family.

2. MULTICULTURALISM VS. INTERCULTURALISM

Brick Lane is a novel in which instances of multiculturalism are better displayed than those of interculturalism. The British society is depicted as one shaken by conflicts between majority and minority groups. This society and the territory it inhabits is the place of encounter of two cultures that, at least during the colonial period, were placed on unequal places of power. Now, the former colonist has become the host for the former colonized. The minority groups, smaller or bigger, are what Bauman calls 'postmodern communities'. Postmodern communities are in fact 'works of the imagination' which 'derive all their confidence-donating power from the stamina and devotion of those who imagine them' (Bauman, 1992:198). Bauman relates the creation of communities to the need of recognition and public support, but at the same time, communities living in a multicultural society need to organize themselves in order to obtain funds and rights to protect their 'diversity'.

They [postmodern communities] derive their authority neither from the past nor the guaranteed future, but from their current notoriety. Being in fashion, sitting in the centre of public attention, counting more devotees than any of the competitors, is all the power they have, and all the power they need. (Bauman, 1992:198)

Minority groups are thus presented as powerless unless supported publicly:

Public support is their life juice – and they do not need any other source of strength. (Bauman, 1992:198)

The group of Muslims (called the Bengal Tigers, set up and led by Karim) who initially started to gather and discuss about their place in the British society, along with discussions about what it takes to be a Muslim, continued by becoming an organized group, with a leader, a secretary and even a Multicultural Liaison Officer. The group's gatherings soon became official meetings with a number of issues on the agenda. The group even printed leaflets to raise awareness among all the members of the Sylheti Bangladeshi community living in Brick Lane and to invite them to take part in their community's marches or to combat other groups' marches, such as the March against the Mullahs or the March against the March against the Mullahs. One critique brought against minority groups in a multicultural society is that it usually focuses on one difference, in favour of other differences which are overlooked, such as the group of women. The Bengal Tigers, although mainly made up of men and bearing a male name, also included women who specifically reclaimed recognition within the group. Later, other groups appeared: the Charitable Foundation or the Bethnal Green Islamic Girls' Group. Communities (read 'groups') are not only minority groups made up of people of a nationality other than British, but also groups of whites – the Lion Hearts. Though she does not put it directly, the author includes titles and descriptions of those groups with a tinge of irony meant to demonstrate the irrationality and lack of meaning of the multicultural-specific society, as well as to hint to the balkanization danger. The Bengal Tigers and its leader, Karim, are but

demonstrations of the constructivist theory according to which cultural identity is also a construct of the individual. The immigrant believes in the illusion of identity and by reconstructing that identity s/he defends himself against the majority group whom s/he sees as invading, opposing or even aggressive. Thus, those who are different start seeing themselves as being discriminated and oppressed. The solution at hand to fight it is to get organized in a group. This is what Karim remembers about 'getting together' as a group:

'(…) When I was at school, we used to be chased home every day. People getting beaten up the whole time. Then we got together, turned the tables. One of us got touched, they all paid for it. We went everywhere together, we started to fight, and we got a reputation.' (Ali, 2003:215)

Although almost a kid himself, Karim, who returned to the values and traditions of his parents' culture, does not agree with the new generation of youngsters who, in his opinion, should take action in order to assert their difference instead of letting themselves be assimilated by the host culture:

'But now, these kids – they don't remember how it used to be. They're in their gangs, and they fight the posse from Camden or King's Cross. Or from the next estate. Or they stay away from all that, earn good money in the restaurants, and that's all they care about. They don't think they can be touched.' (Ali, 2003:215)

His words come to confirm Bauman's assertions previously mentioned in this chapter according to which communities need public support in order to exist. The idea is illustrated in the book by the interminable battle of the leaflets. The two most important and opposing groups – the Bengal Tigers and the Lion Hearts – distribute instigating leaflets in support of one or the other group. The conflict between the two cultures is thus mostly expressed by means of words and only seldom by actions. Nevertheless, Ali's attitude is again ironical towards both groups, meaning to emphasize the superfluousness of the conflict. The conflict thus becomes a real

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'war' and the words written on paper are deadly weapons:

On the estate there was war. The war was conducted by leaflet. They were crudely constructed, printed on the thickness of toilet tissue and smudged by over-eager hands. The type size of the headlines became an important battlefield. (Ali, 2003:212)

The conflict was almost inevitable as the presence of immigrants who have come to find a job and to build a life for themselves on the land of the hegemonic culture makes the members of this culture become anxious or even feel threatened. The Other (read 'the immigrant' or 'the community of immigrants') is no longer the fear of the unknown, as now the Other is a known threat, capable of triggering changes in a society that so far has been monolithic.

The relations of power are seen differently by the two groups (the immigrants and the natives): once the immigrants were the oppressed, but in time they organized themselves in groups capable to protect their members and to stand up for their rights; now, the 'oppressor' (the majority group) feels oppressed because of the immigrants' assertion and promotion of their diversity. As Chanu says to Nazneen:

'You see,'(…), 'in their minds they have become an oppressed minority.' (Ali, 2003: 210)

The white community (the natives) is not ready to adapt to the diversity brought about by the immigrants and is not prepared to share the power. As Woodward suggests:

The scale and scope of the phenomena associated with globalization suggest that there are imbalances of power and that there might be a much stronger weighting in favour of the agency and control of some parts of the world and on the part of some protagonists. (Woodward, 2002:55).

Chanu understands the nature of the conflict between the two cultures and even tries to figure out for himself who is right and who is not, but, as expected, he does not manage to find an answer:

'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, 2003: 209-210)

In a multicultural society, the promotion of diversity may come counter to the preservation of national values, a fact which the majority may understand as oppressive and aggressive. Chanu admits that, in fact, 'it's their country', so 'you can't really blame them' (Ali, 2003: 211). By these words, Chanu acknowledges the privilege of nationality and confirms the importance of territory and space in favour of a globalised world-view in which notions such as spatial boundaries and the territory-limited nation-state have become obsolete. If I look at Trivedi's assertions related to multiculturalism:

All the recent talk of multiculturalism relates (…) not to the many different cultures located all over the world, but merely to expedient social management of a small sample of migrants from some of these cultures who have actually dislocated themselves and arrived in the First World, and who now must be melted down in that pot, or tossed in that salad, or fitted as an odd little piece into that mosaic. (Trivedi, 2007: 27)

I may be more right to underline here the author's lack of support of multiculturalism by resorting to a few assertions in the novel that refer to an individual's identity in a multicultural society – a constructed identity. The main character, who in most of the novel is also the narrator or the author's alter ego, is

herself on the quest of finding her own identity but, unlike many of the other characters in the novel, she is looking for her individual identity, not for a collective one; in other words, she does not need to identify herself with a particular group so as to have a feeling of belonging to something that would help her find herself. Thus, she has more freedom in analyzing and understanding others, white people or Bengali like herself, who are also on the quest of identity-finding. One day, on one of her rare walks taken outside by herself, Nazneen's attention was caught by a young white woman 'in high-heeled boots and jeans' whose 'footsteps rang like declarations.' (Ali, 2003:374) Nazneen interpreted the woman's footsteps as declarations of one's identity:

> *One step in front of the other. Could it say, I am this and I am not this? Could a walk tell lies? Could it change you?* (Ali, 2003:374)

She understood that Karim himself was still in search of his identity; in order to do this, he started looking for aids or substitutes. He organized the Bengal Tigers and started to look for his origins. As he is just a man in a place of 'in-betweenness', he tries to construct a definite place for himself, a place of belonging. Although only a 'simple girl from the village', who did not know anything about multiculturalism and diversity, and who may not even have heard these words, Nazneen understood the source of her lover's need of belonging:

> *Karim did not have his place in the world. That was why he defended it.* (Ali, 2003: 375)

The second aid that Karim wanted to use in order to define himself as a person belonging to a group was Nazneen herself: he started a relationship with Nazneen and eventually wanted to marry her as a symbol and finality of his identity-finding:

How did Karim see her?
> *The real thing, he said. She was his real thing. A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her.* (Ali, 2003: 380)

Having a hybrid identity, Karim cannot find the common ground between the two cultures that influenced his growth. This is why he finally decides to embrace one of them, the one he identifies with.

3. CONCLUSION

Diversity is fully presented in Brick Lane, along with different aspects of it. It is either asserted and reclaimed by members of the minority group, or simply accepted as such and dignifiedly borne by the individual. The conflicts, ironically described by the writer, both between groups and between members of the same group are a mark of the flaws that accompany multicultural theory. I will rather support Trivedi's attitude related to bilingualism: if the 'bilingual bicultural ground is eroded away', we shall run the risk of having 'a wholly translated, monolingual, monocultural, monolithic world' and translation itself will be 'untranslated or detranslated' (Trivedi, 2007). As interculturalism is still an ideal to be achieved, globalisation and migration are two largely discussed and analysed issues that I will deal with in a subsequent paper.

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