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Refugees and Immigrants: community and struggles

Most of the public is accustomed to referring to refugees and immigrants as a single group, using the words as synonyms for one another. This lack of distinction discredits the communal and individual struggles a person experiences as a part of either group. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees* are two different types of literature that offer two different perspectives of the lives of Bangladeshi immigrants in England and Vietnamese refugees in the United States respectively. Both works, despite narrating the situations of two different groups of people, share mutual problems such as socio-political discrimination within the western receiver countries, conflicts within the ethnic community, and individual struggles as people who leave their homeland and their descendants.

Both *Brick Lane* and *The Refugees* contain important historical events that surround the story (ies), which affect the way the characters in the books live and are treated. While *Brick Lane*'s 9/11 event happens later in the novel, *The Refugees* deals with the aftermath of the Vietnam War. In both pieces of literature, the audience can witness how the Bangladeshi and Vietnamese communities are impacted by their close or distant association with the events. In *The Refugees* those who escaped are seen as victims, expected to retell their traumatic experiences over and over again to those in the country that received them, a country to which they should be grateful and be happy they were saved by the good, democratic, and free United States of America. An appropriate example is the main character of the story "The Other Man",

Liem, a young refugee taken in by a homosexual couple. “In the four months since he’d fled Saigon, he’d been asked for his story again and again, by sailors, marines, and social workers, their questions becoming all too predictable. What was it like? How do you feel? Isn’t it all so *sad?*” (Nguyen, 26). In order to be accepted into the new society, a sense of American nationalism is expected from the refugees: hatred toward the communists, feeling sorry for those who are still in Vietnam and viewing the US as a heroic land of liberty and a symbol of freedom. Moussa Pourya Asl’s article *The Politics of Space: Vietnam as a Communist Heterotopia in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s The Refugees* helps dive further into this ideology, briefly comparing the Vietnamese experience portrayed in Nguyen’s work with those of the Muslim and Arab communities post the tragedy known as 9/11, an event which is said to have occurred in the same timeline as *Brick Lane*. Asl talks about how these historical events alter America’s sense of nationalism and consequently, who it sees as a threat to its security. A similar phenomenon happens in England as seen in *Brick Lane*. After the events of 9/11, the Muslim community of Brick Lane was marginalized and treated with disrespect simply because of their appearance and religion. Asl states that “the disciplinary power [of the United States] has sought to systematically reconstruct, reimagine and retell the popular and official narratives about American wars against Communism in its own political interests” (p. 159). Thanh’s work is proof of the United State’s success in showing its side of the war to the public.

Not only do the host countries have expectations for those to who they provide a place to, but the community of immigrants/refugees itself does too. Mutual gender roles are practiced both in *Brick Lane* and *The Refugees*: the women tend to children and their husbands while the men work and provide for the family. Such roles are checked in *Brick Lane* by Mrs. Islam, Nazneen’s neighbor who knows everything about everyone. It is common for her to make sure the women

in her community are fulfilling their duties as housewives, those who don't follow the norm, such as Razia, are gossiped about and have their reputations dragged by Mrs. Islam. Mrs. Hoa from "War Years" can be seen as a similar character to Mrs. Islam. When the "mother" of the story refuses to give Mrs. Hoa money for the cause of the war, she tells everyone to boycott her store since she supports the communists. Both characters make sure to stain the name of those who don't follow the norms. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen obtains her "freedom" at the end of the novel when Chanu returns alone to Bangladesh and Mrs. Islam passes away. The coincidence of this last event with Nazneen's sense of liberty signifies Mrs. Islam was not only a character herself restraining Nazneen's full flourishing as a woman but also a figure representing Bangladeshi/Islamic culture, both based on a patriarchal hierarchy and conservative values that do not have room for deviants of their social structure. Mrs. Hoa, however, doesn't try to turn the community against the mother only because she thinks the mother sympathizes with the communists, which is opposite to the community norm, but also because Mrs. Hoa herself refuses to accept that the war is over, due to the trauma of the personal loss of her husband and sons, still having hope that they will come back and obtain justice.

Ali and Nguyen use the same symbols when covering topics of trauma and the conservation of the culture of first and second-generation immigrants and refugees but use them to represent different sentiments of the characters. Nazneen sees the ghost of her mother, representing her feeling of guilt because she fails to be a good mother and wife according to her culture's traditional values. The ghostwriter in *The Refugees* story "Black-Eyed Women" sees the ghost of her brother, representing the guilt she feels knowing she was able to escape alive while her brother died. While the first generations of immigrants and refugees strongly preserve their culture, the descendants of these people in *Brick Lane* and *The Refugees* reject and resent their

culture and tradition because they want to be accepted as individuals in the designated western societies they have been growing up in. Ali's depiction of this feeling is very clear: Chanu makes sure his daughters know where they come from and what their culture is while avoiding assimilating into liberal British society. Ahmed Saad Aziz states that "Actually they fear that if they will integrate in the new culture then their own cultural roots will stagnate and they will not be able to tie their next generations to their own cultural roots" (76). The statement is further proved by Chanu who says: "I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I am talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family. (Ali, 92). Shahana, Nazneen and Chanu's oldest daughter, act out and want nothing to do with Bangladeshi culture. In Nguyen's "War Years", "the boy" constantly complains about his parents' Vietnamese mannerisms and culture which they choose to preserve strongly. They only sell Vietnamese items at their store and they go to church on Sundays. The boy constantly mentions American products like bologna and pop culture figures: "She was paying me for each strand I found and I was intent on my search, each hair bringing me one nickel closer to the next issue of Captain America" (Nguyen, 54). At the end of this particular short story, the boy cannot choose what to buy when his mother gives him money to spend: "While the clerks chatted in a language I could not understand, I hesitated, yearning to take everything home but unable to choose" (Nguyen, 72). This situation represents how the boy cannot choose which culture he wants to identify with: Vietnamese or American. The boy, just like Shahana with England, desires to be accepted as an American and live like those he sees outside of his Vietnamese communities.

Brick Lane and *The Refugees* allow the audience to step into the experiences and struggles of immigrants and refugees respectively. Both communities share similar problems and feelings due to their cultural norms, desire to assimilate, and their past. Despite this, it is essential to read and interpret both pieces of literature as their own unique set of situations and struggles in order to recognize each group's hardships to be exclusive to each community because of the contextual events surrounding the narrations. Independently from the books, it is important that the challenges faced by refugees and immigrants be not placed together as one problem. They are different and must be addressed individually so they can receive proper representation and understanding.

Works Cited

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