Fiction, Memoir, or Both? A Look into the Narrative Styles in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane and Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own ~ Kelley Hantzsche

Kelley Hantzsche wrote her paper, “Fiction, Memoir, or Both? A Look into the Narrative styles in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane and Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own,” for Dr. Adolph’s Brit and Irish Lit 1900-Present (ENG 34005) course. Students were asked to select two of the works discussed during the semester and write at 5 page essay comparing and/or contrasting themes, styles, or other aspects of the works.

Writers create windows in fiction to bridge the gap leading to reality. In fact, many women novelists choose to focus on their experiences to pave the way for readers to become part of the stories. “Feminine thinking tends to be more concerned with the particulars of concrete situations and with a multiplicity of variable, context-dependent factors” (Simson 3-4). This idea of re-creating experiences and situations in novels has led writers to use experimental narrative forms such as the incorporation of letters and the personal “I.” These two types of writing styles can be found in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane and Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own.

Woolf, who is known as one of the most influential literary figures from the twentieth century, reiterates in her writing the need for writers, especially women writers, to draw on their own experiences by stating, “since a novel has this correspondence to real life, its values are to some extent those of real life” (Woolf 72). No matter the culture, race, or gender of the writer, is some real life seeps in the story and leads the writer to enlighten readers to new truths they may not have been aware of before hand. Ali feels that women and “non-white” writers are creating a “reflection of reality” (Adebayo 349). If in fact the reader is encountering the same types of experiences that the writer is picturing, then the writing creates a community feeling where the reader is no longer alone in the experiences.

Unfortunately, narrative theories do not necessarily address the issues of incorporating the experiences of the writer that are brought up in this essay, especially in regards to culture and history. There is a “lack of emphasis on historical developments in the realm of cultural studies narratology” unless it is focused on the feminist narrative (Fludernik 331). In light of this, the narrative styles of fiction, where history and autobiography cross, should be divided into distinct genres because when studying historical questions on “narrative, one soon finds that the sheer number of relevant topics and their significance are overwhelming” (Fludernik 332).

The documentary narrative can skim the borders of fact and fiction; however, it is still too broad a genre to place either Brick Lane or A Room of One’s Own. One genre that can include both, and does fit into a division of the narrative theory, is one that I have coined and, in the past, called “fictional femoir” (Hantzsche 5). This new genre would then fix problems, like “accuracy and honesty,” in the memoir genre allowing for “what they call a ‘hybrid’ narrative, a form that frees [the writer] to image and invent as well as remember” (Clark pars 4, 5). This will ensure that “so called fictional techniques in memoir are neither lies nor embellishments” (Clark pars 6).

In regard to Brick Lane, it would fit into this new type of genre due to Ali’s admittance in Writing Across Worlds that she “was drawing on [her] own childhood, not in a way that was particularly autobiographical in any straight forward way but it was there” (Adebayo 346). We can also see Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own as being slightly autobiographical, or at least a subconscious shadowing of events is Woolf’s life. An example of this foreshadowing can be found in Woolf’s narrator’s statement that:

any women born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would have certainly gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village….To have lived a free life in London in the sixteenth century would have meant for a woman who was poet and playwright a nervous stress and dilemma which might well have killed her (49).

As most scholars know, Woolf ended her life after
spending a "rest cure" in a cottage with her husband. She was obviously prone to nervous stress. No matter what she wrote about, her love of London, and her yearning to return to the city, she still succumbed to the very thing she was warning against. It definitely is ironic on the part of her writing, or maybe it is foresight because she wrote these lines long before her fateful walk to the River Ouse in Sussex (Gubar XXXIV).

In the case of Ali, her experiences drive her to preserve the stories handed down from her father (Adebayo 341). To accomplish this we can only wonder if the relationship between Ali's character, Chanu, and his daughters is like that of Ali and her own father. Chanu has many qualities such as being an avid reader that the readers of Brick Lane can see as a connection to Ali's own father, who introduced her to literature like “Tolstoy and R.K. Narayan” (Adebayo 342-343).

It can be assumed that it is within the father-daughter relationship that some fiction is at work, for example, when Chanu forces his daughters to recite poems and "he was more teaching than taught and the chief beneficiaries were the girls" (Ali 148).

Therefore, it can also be assumed that Ali's use of letters within the text is a driving force to pull in the readers and move through the narrative in a new way, creating a memoir of sorts concerning the protagonist's sister, Hasina, which may mirror the lives of Bangladesh women, whose tales were possibly told to place fear in the hearts of the young. Ali states, "we [the British Asian, Black, and non-white writers] have a different perspective, we have to tell, personal stories about migration and displacement" (Adebayo 349). The addition of letters also allows Ali to move her narrative "from one set of characters in one location to another set of characters in a different location" and also moves time forward by several years. (Fludernik 334).

These tales that Ali heard and saw during her childhood, and into adulthood, of fallen women, drug abuse, the role of Bangladesh women, abuse of power, and modernized 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants are all woven into Brick Lane. The fact that many 2nd and 3rd generation woman have problems with their identities stating, "that [they] can neither shirk off [their] Britishness nor return permanently to Bangladesh" creates many conflicts (Gillian pars 27).

Ali shows readers this generational gap and conflicts that come from migration by introduction of Shahana, Chanu's teenage daughter. When touring London, the family asks a stranger to take a picture and when he inquires about the origins Chanu promptly states they are from Bangladesh, while Shahana rolls her eyes and says, "I'm from London" (244).

Like Ali, Woolf strives to tell a story of empowerment for women; although, she states, she will make “use of all the liberties and licenses of a novelist, to tell [...] the story of the two days that preceded my coming here” (5). She is using fictional stories in her speeches as examples (though only she knows how much is set in fact or fiction). Also, Woolf uses the stories to draw out her own life lessons and desires, to transport them to the listeners or, in this case, readers. She states, that the “whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get a sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness” (103).

Also, by allowing the narrator to use the feminine “I” form, Woolf is basing her narrator “not in biology, but rather in cultural fearlessness” (DuPlessis 375). She is extending the experiences of the self to the narrator and creating an example of good communication with her readers. Woolf chose to experiment with narrative form to propel the words from the page into the reality of those who were always doing “work that one did not wish to do, and to do it like a slave, flattering and fawning, not always necessarily perhaps, but it seemed necessary and the stakes were too great to run risks” such as choosing not to be a slave (37).

The slave-like work not only applies to Woolf’s writing, but also transcends to Ali’s and is seen in Brick Lane’s protagonist, Nazneen, who in the end chooses to remove the cultural bondage and raise her children on her own. Here both authors are writing in “Woolf’s shorthand [...] for a writing unafraid of gender as an issue, undeverential to male judgment” (DuPlessis 375). It is this shorthand that gives Nazneen strength throughout Ali’s novel to progress in London and become self-sufficient. Nazneen is bridging the gender gap and working with friends, running their own sewing/designing business. This would be unheard of in Bangladesh; however, due to Ali’s experiences in London, she can mirror them on the page for readers to access a new understanding of migrating cultures.

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It is the experiences of the writer that create the words on the pages, the experiences that draw readers in, and the experiences that make readers believe. Of course writers can research these experiences, but the question then remains: will the readers extend their disbelief long enough to finish the novel? In the cases of Virginia Woolf and Monica Ali, it is clear that although one comes at the reader head on with her experiences and desires and the other merely transports the reader to Brick Lane and then creates a time and place interwoven with reality, the reader can suspend their disbelief and be pulled headlong into the narrative. This paves the way for current women novelists to incorporate new, experimental narrative styles into their own writing without fear.

Works Cited


