Bodhi International Journal of
Research in Humanities, Arts and Science

Vol. 9 No. 4 July 2025
E-ISSN: 2456-5571

The Existential Function of Choice in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

Dr. K. Gomathy
Assistant Professor of English (STC)
Avvaiyar Government College for Women, Karaikal, Puducherry

Open Access

Manuscript ID:
BIJ-2025-J-028

Subject: English

Received : 04.06.2025
Accepted : 06.06.2025
Published : 28.07.2025

Abstract
This paper explores the existential dimension of Monica Ali's Brick Lane through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy, particularly his concepts of radical freedom and responsibility. Central to Sartre's existentialism is the belief that individuals are condemned to be free, meaning they must continuously choose and, in doing so, define their essence. Within Brick Lane, Nazneen's journey from passive submission to active self-definition encapsulates this existential struggle. The research focuses on key moments where Nazneen and other characters, such as Chanu, Karim, and Razia, confront meaningful choices that redefine their sense of self and agency. These small acts of choice—from Nazneen deciding to stop writing letters to her sister, to her final rejection of Karim's proposal—illustrate an incremental process of existential awakening. By interpreting these moments through Sartre's framework, the paper argues that Brick Lane presents not only a narrative of cultural and gendered displacement but also an existential narrative of becoming. The analysis reveals how choice functions as both a burden and a vehicle for self-creation, illuminating the existential tensions inherent in immigrant life and female subjectivity. Ultimately, Brick Lane demonstrates that even in constrained conditions, the act of choosing can be a profound assertion of being.
Keywords: existential choice, sense of self, existential struggle, existential awakening, authenticity, bad faith, subjectivity, self creation, radical freedom

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is a nuanced exploration of the immigrant experience, gender roles, and personal transformation set against the backdrop of London's Bangladeshi community. At its heart, however, the novel is a deeply existential narrative—a portrayal of an individual, Nazneen, navigating her sense of self in a world shaped by cultural determinism, patriarchal authority, and socio-political marginalization. Through Nazneen's internal evolution, the novel raises profound philosophical questions about freedom, responsibility, and the meaning of choice.

This paper applies Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist framework—particularly his concepts of radical freedom and bad faith—to examine how characters in *Brick Lane* confront and enact meaningful choices. Sartre's existentialism argues that human beings are condemned to be free: they must define themselves through their actions in a world without predetermined essence. In this context, choice is not merely a plot device but the core expression of human existence.

By analyzing key moments of decision—ranging from Nazneen's early passivity to her final assertion of autonomy—this paper argues that small acts of choice accumulate to reflect a broader existential awakening. These moments are not only central to the protagonist's personal development but also serve to critique and reimagine the possibilities of identity and agency within diasporic and gendered

constraints. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) centers on the life of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi immigrant in London, as she navigates marriage, motherhood, and the alien landscape of diaspora. Set in a multicultural Britain that often marginalizes immigrant voices, the novel is widely recognized for its portrayal of gender, tradition, and the immigrant experience. However, this paper argues that beneath these social themes lies a deeply existential narrative. Using Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy as a lens, this paper examines how *Brick Lane* dramatizes the function of choice in shaping identity. Sartre posits that individuals are radically free, even in the face of social or political constraint, and that their essence is created through acts of will. This framework is particularly illuminating when applied to Nazneen's evolution from passivity to agency. By analyzing key moments where Nazneen and other characters confront and act upon existential choices, the novel emerges not only as a socio-political narrative but as an existential exploration of self-creation.

Criticism of *Brick Lane* has primarily focused on its representation of diasporic identity, feminism, and postcolonial subjectivity. Scholars such as Claire Chambers and Sarah Brouillette have explored how Ali navigates issues of cultural hybridity and gender oppression. Chambers emphasizes Nazneen's growth as a feminist subject, while Brouillette critiques the novel's reception within a neoliberal literary marketplace. Though these perspectives highlight important dimensions of the text, few analyses delve into the existential undercurrents that structure the characters' moral and psychological transformations. Existentialist readings of literature often emerge in relation to canonical Western texts, but the framework is equally potent when applied to postcolonial narratives like *Brick Lane*, where personal freedom is contested by systemic limitations. Sartre's concepts of freedom, bad faith, and authenticity provide a novel lens for understanding how Ali's characters make meaning within constraint.

Sartre's existentialism, particularly in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), insists on the primacy of human freedom. He argues that existence precedes essence, meaning individuals must define themselves through action. This freedom is not liberatory in a simple sense; it is a burden, as every choice entails responsibility. Sartre terms evasion of this responsibility "bad faith"—when individuals deceive themselves into thinking they are not free. Authenticity, conversely, is achieved when individuals recognize and act upon their freedom, despite anxiety or social pressure. These ideas frame the analysis of *Brick Lane* as a narrative about existential awakening through acts of choice. Nazneen's character arc exemplifies the shift from bad faith to authenticity, and even secondary characters like Chanu, Karim, and Razia are illuminated through this existential lens.

Nazneen's early life in *Brick Lane* is steeped in fatalism, shaped by the idea that her destiny is preordained and that her only role is to submit. Her mother's parting words—"It is written"—serve as a mantra for passivity, one that Nazneen internalizes and uses to rationalize her lack of agency. This cultural conditioning aligns closely with Sartre's concept of "bad faith," where an individual denies their freedom by accepting imposed roles and definitions. Sartre argues that bad faith involves self-deception, where one acts as though they have no choice in order to escape the anxiety that freedom brings. In this state, individuals relinquish their subjectivity and become objects shaped by external forces.

Nazneen's acceptance of an arranged marriage to Chanu—a man significantly older, unfamiliar, and physically unappealing to her—is the most overt manifestation of this bad faith. She does not resist or question the match; instead, she complies with what is expected, telling herself that endurance is virtuous. Her emotional responses are muted, and she approaches her marriage as a duty rather than a mutual partnership. She cooks, cleans, and tends to Chanu's needs without voicing dissent, illustrating the extent to which she has buried her own desires beneath the weight of cultural and familial expectation.

This early passivity is not mere obedience; it is a philosophical position, whether conscious or not. Nazneen embraces an essentialist view of identity—believing that her role as wife and immigrant woman is fixed, immutable, and defined by others. Sartre, however, insists that existence precedes essence. From this standpoint, Nazneen's belief in her lack

of freedom is itself a choice—one that evades the responsibility of defining her own life. In pretending to be what she is not—a mere product of destiny—Nazneen performs the very self-deception Sartre describes.

Moreover, her physical isolation in the Tower Hamlets apartment mirrors her psychological entrapment. Cut off from the outside world and unable to speak fluent English, she becomes dependent on Chanu not only for social navigation but for the interpretation of reality itself. The domestic sphere becomes both a literal and symbolic space of confinement, reinforcing the illusion that she has no options beyond compliance. In this environment, Nazneen's subjectivity is suspended. She sees herself through the lens of Chanu and her cultural past, rather than through the active lens of her own becoming.

Yet, even in this early stage, signs of disquiet emerge. There are moments where Nazneen's internal monologue suggests an awareness of her predicament, a buried but persistent consciousness that she is not fully alive in her own life. These glimpses hint at the existential tension that will later become explicit. They suggest that her passivity, while deeply rooted, is not permanent—that the seeds of freedom and self-authorship are already germinating within her.

Nazneen's life begins with a defining act of passivity: her arranged marriage to Chanu, a much older man she has never met. Her mother advises her to accept fate, telling her to "endure," echoing a deterministic worldview that denies freedom. This resignation is a textbook case of Sartrean bad faith—Nazneen suppresses her capacity for choice under the guise of cultural destiny. Early in the novel, she lives according to Chanu's rules, repressing desires and opinions. Sartre would argue that Nazneen is denying her existential responsibility by accepting an externally imposed identity.

While Nazneen's early life is characterized by resignation and passivity, her gradual shift toward autonomy begins with seemingly insignificant acts of resistance. These choices, though minor on the surface, mark the beginning of her existential awakening. Sartre's notion that individuals define themselves through actions, no matter how small, underscores the importance of these moments. Nazneen's choice to sew clothes for income, despite Chanu's initial disapproval, represents a pivotal turn away from pure dependence. It is the first instance where she exercises her freedom to engage with the world on her own terms.

Writing to her sister Hasina also becomes an act of quiet rebellion. Initially filtered and cautious, her letters become increasingly candid, revealing her inner conflict and growing awareness of her dissatisfaction. In doing so, she constructs a private self that exists outside of her prescribed identity. This hidden self—reflected in the tone and content of her letters—demonstrates a movement toward authenticity, even if she is not yet prepared to act on it publicly.

Furthermore, Nazneen's small rebellions against Chanu's control—the way she navigates household responsibilities or handles his frequent failures with quiet resilience—signal a growing confidence in her judgment. These actions may lack overt defiance, but they express a critical shift: Nazneen is beginning to view herself as a person capable of choice, rather than an extension of someone else's will. Sartre would identify these moments as precursors to authentic existence. They show that even under oppressive circumstances, the freedom to choose remains an intrinsic part of the human condition. As these choices accumulate, Nazneen lays the groundwork for more significant acts of self-determination.

Over time, Nazneen's small choices begin to accumulate significance. She begins writing to her sister Hasina with growing honesty, a subtle assertion of autonomy. Her decision to secretly sew clothes for income also indicates a shift from passivity to action. While these choices are minor, they are meaningful in the Sartrean sense—they assert her ability to define her essence through action. Sartre writes, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." Nazneen's private decisions foreshadow her eventual transformation.

Karim's entry into Nazneen's life introduces the possibility of romantic and emotional fulfillment, a stark contrast to her stagnant relationship with Chanu. At first, the affair appears to be a liberating experience; it awakens Nazneen to new dimensions of desire and personal agency. Through Karim,

she experiences what Sartre might describe as a confrontation with her subjectivity—her capacity to feel, choose, and act according to her own desires. Yet, as the relationship deepens, so too does Nazneen's existential conflict.

Karim represents more than a lover; he embodies an alternative ideology and lifestyle that initially seems to promise empowerment but eventually reveals itself as another system of control. His growing involvement in Islamist activism and his attempts to influence Nazneen's values mirror Chanu's paternalistic tendencies. The realization that Karim, too, wishes to define her reality becomes a turning point. Sartre's concept of bad faith resurfaces here: submitting to Karim's ideology would mean replacing one external definition of self with another, thus forfeiting her freedom once again.

Nazneen's decision to end the affair is one of the most significant existential choices in the novel. It demonstrates her rejection of false freedom and her refusal to be absorbed into another's narrative. This act of disengagement is not a retreat into solitude but an assertion of autonomy. She chooses to bear the anguish of freedom rather than escape into another dependency. Sartre maintains that true freedom entails the willingness to accept the anxiety of choice and the responsibility that comes with it. Nazneen's rejection of Karim is, therefore, an affirmation of her growing authenticity.

Nazneen's affair with Karim introduces an existential crisis. The relationship is initially intoxicating, giving her a sense of agency and recognition. Yet, as Karim becomes more involved in Islamic fundamentalist activism, Nazneen sees that aligning with him would mean substituting one form of control for another. Her choice to end the relationship is a pivotal existential moment. It reflects not only her recognition of bad faith but also her willingness to bear the anguish of freedom and act authentically.

Chanu's decision to return to Bangladesh is fraught with existential ambiguity. Throughout the novel, he is portrayed as an educated man with unrealized ambitions, caught between his cultural pride and the reality of his marginalization in Britain. His desire to return "home" is driven by a longing for dignity and control, yet it is also an evasion of the present. In Sartrean terms, Chanu's choice appears to be one of bad faith—a refusal to confront his situation in London and take responsibility for shaping a meaningful existence within it.

Rather than adapt to his environment or work toward authentic self-definition, Chanu clings to an idealized vision of the past. He believes that repatriation will restore his authority and respect, but this nostalgia becomes a form of self-deception. Sartre warns against such escapism, arguing that authenticity requires individuals to live fully in their present condition, embracing their freedom and acting within their circumstances rather than outside of them.

Chanu's choice to leave, then, while seemingly decisive, underscores his existential retreat. Unlike Nazneen, who begins to accept the burden of freedom and actively shape her future, Chanu seeks refuge in a geographic and psychological return to a time when roles seemed fixed and uncontested. His character highlights the complexity of existential responsibility in a diasporic context—where every choice is filtered through the pain of displacement and the illusion of cultural absolutes.

Chanu's character presents an intriguing counterpoint. He makes the choice to return to Bangladesh, believing it will restore dignity and control. However, Sartre would likely critique this decision as a form of bad faith, a retreat into nostalgia rather than a confrontation with freedom. Chanu's desire to escape the present moment suggests an unwillingness to assume full responsibility for his condition in London. His choice is meaningful but ambiguous—it exposes the complexity of existential responsibility in diasporic contexts.

Razia is perhaps the most overtly empowered female figure in *Brick Lane*, offering a striking example of Sartrean authenticity in action. Her transformation from a deferential wife to an independent, self-reliant woman parallels Nazneen's journey but occurs earlier and more decisively. After her husband's death from drug addiction, Razia confronts her reality head-on. Instead of succumbing to despair or social judgment, she takes decisive steps to secure her autonomy and that of her children.

Razia's rejection of traditional expectations—evident in her cropped hair, Western dress, and

entrepreneurial efforts—is not merely symbolic. It represents a full embrace of her freedom to choose her identity and reject inherited roles. Sartre's notion of crafting a life-project is vividly embodied in Razia's actions. She does not look to others to define her value but instead constructs her meaning through effort, responsibility, and self-determination.

Unlike Chanu or Karim, Razia does not seek validation from cultural nostalgia or ideological rigidity. Her authenticity lies in her grounded, pragmatic approach to life. She faces hardship without resorting to bad faith and refuses to blame fate or society for her condition. Through her, the novel offers a model of female agency that is neither romanticized nor exceptional—it is simply human. Razia's character affirms that existential freedom is accessible even within the structural constraints of class, gender, and migration.

The culmination of Nazneen's existential journey arrives when she makes the decision to remain in London with her daughters, rejecting both Karim's marriage proposal and Chanu's plan to return to Bangladesh. This choice marks a radical departure from her earlier passivity. It is the moment where she fully embraces Sartre's concept of radical freedom—choosing not out of fear, obligation, or illusion, but out of self-recognition.

Nazneen's final decision is not made in haste or under pressure. Instead, it emerges from a sustained process of self-reflection and growing consciousness. She weighs her options, considers the implications, and ultimately chooses the path that affirms her individuality and her responsibilities. In Sartre's terms, this is an act of authenticity: Nazneen defines her essence through action, becoming who she is by what she does.

This decision also has generational implications. By choosing to stay, Nazneen asserts a new model of agency for her daughters. She rejects the narratives of helplessness and subordination that have governed her life, creating a future grounded in freedom and self-determination. Her choice is not grand or revolutionary in the conventional sense, but existentially, it is transformative.

In staying, Nazneen affirms that her identity is not fixed by origin, marriage, or cultural mandate. She is no longer the girl who passively accepted her fate; she is now a woman who acts. Through this act, Ali presents choice not merely as a narrative device but as the core mechanism of existential becoming. Nazneen's awakening reminds us that in choosing, we assert our humanity.

Nazneen's ultimate decision—to remain in London with her daughters rather than return to Bangladesh with Chanu or marry Karim—encapsulates the existential function of choice. This act is not dramatic in scale but profound in meaning. She assumes full responsibility for her life, affirming Sartre's idea that "freedom is what you do with what's been done to you." By choosing to stay, Nazneen asserts her autonomy and claims authorship of her own narrative. It is an existential awakening grounded in the everyday.

Brick Lane is, above all, a novel about becoming—about the slow and often painful process through which individuals recognize their freedom and choose to take responsibility for their lives. Through Nazneen's journey, Monica Ali demonstrates how even the most constrained lives contain the potential for transformation. What begins as a narrative of resignation evolves into one of assertion and authorship. The decisions Nazneen makes—whether to sew, to love, to resist, or to stay—are cumulative acts of existential self-definition.

Viewed through Sartre's lens, these choices exemplify the move from bad faith to authenticity. In accepting the anxiety and weight of freedom, Nazneen ceases to be a passive object of fate and becomes an active subject of her own life. Her journey affirms that even within rigid social structures, individuals are never entirely without agency. Every small act of resistance is an existential act, a moment of reclaiming the self.

Ultimately, *Brick Lane* challenges readers to rethink the significance of ordinary decisions. It invites us to see choice not as a luxury of the powerful but as the inescapable condition of being human. In doing so, Ali not only tells a story of one woman's awakening but also offers a quietly radical vision of freedom in the face of historical and cultural determinism.

Vol. 9 No. 4 July 2025
E-ISSN: 2456-5571

Works Cited

1. Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. Scribner, 2003.
2. Brouillette, Sarah. "Literature and the Creative Economy." *Cultural Critique*, vol. 72, 2009, pp. 129–156.
3. Chambers, Claire. *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
4. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes, Routledge, 2003.
5. Warnock, Mary. *Existentialism*. Oxford University Press, 1970.