

The Role of Food and Foodways in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

Dorota Rygiel

Carpathian State College in Krosno, Poland
d.rygiel@poczta.fm

Abstract

The primary function of food is to regulate basic body processes and support its functions. However, the role of food is more than just the satisfaction of physiological needs. Food and foodways are important elements of each culture deeply rooted in individual and collective memory. They define specific ethnic groups and mark particular cultures. The aim of this paper is to show multidimensional roles that food plays in the lives of the community and an individual on the example of Brick Lane by Monica Ali. An emphasis is put not only on the psychological, cultural, aesthetic and social functions of food but also on the constructive role of nostalgic food memories. Food and culinary rituals play a crucial role in the protagonist's life, as they symbolically accompany the process of the identity formation and the personal transformation she undergoes.

Keywords: food, culinary practices, identity, ethnic ties, Bangladeshi diaspora, Monica Ali

Streszczenie

Wielowymiarowa rola kulinariów na przykładzie *Brick Lane* Moniki Ali

Jedzenie jako jedna z najbardziej podstawowych potrzeb człowieka służy podtrzymywaniu funkcji życiowych i regulacji podstawowych procesów organizmu. Trzeba jednak pamiętać, że rola jedzenia nie sprowadza się jedynie do wymiaru fizjologicznego. Jest ono bowiem istotnym elementem każdej kultury głęboko zakorzenionym w pamięci indywidualnej i zbiorowej. Tradycje kulinarne definiują grupy etniczne i charakteryzują poszczególne kultury. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie wielowymiarowej roli jedzenia w życiu zbiorowości oraz jednostki na przykładzie powieści Brick Lane autorstwa Moniki Ali. Autorka niniejszego artykułu koncentruje uwagę nie tylko na psychologicznej, kulturowej estetycznej czy społecznej funkcji jedzenia ale także na konstruktywnej roli nostalgicznych wspomnień, które wywołują tradycje kulinarne. Jedzenie i praktyki kulinarne pełnią ważną rolę w życiu głównej bohaterki powieści, bowiem symbolicznie towarzyszą jej w procesie kształtowania tożsamości i osobistej transformacji.

Słowa kluczowe: kulinaria, zwyczaje kulinarne, tożsamość, więź etniczna, banglijska diaspora, Monica Ali

Food participates in multiple symbolic systems in a society, and as such we can discern various meanings from what, when, where and how people consume it. (Greene 2008: 34)

1. Introduction

Acknowledged sociologists, philosophers and cultural theorists focus on various aspects of identity that are related to history and ethnic, religious and linguistic affiliation, but they often neglect the role of dietary tradition in forming one's identity (e.g. Bhabha 2004; Hofstede et al. 2010; Hall 1990).

Food is not confined to the satisfaction of human physiological needs and regulation of bodily functions. It is a multi-layered concept whose functions extend far beyond maintaining body processes, especially in developed countries, where starvation is no longer a problem. For example, the psychological function of food relates to the satisfaction of emotional needs, like those of love, approval and safety, and to dealing with negative emotions like stress. Social function, in turn, involves the exchange of social contacts, intensification of mutual relationships and maintenance of social integration. Aesthetic means that what we eat gives information about our tastes. Cultural function of food is connected with the identification of status differences and group differentiation, whereas moral means that food reveals who we are and what our material status is (see Chopra 2005; Korthals 2002). Hardly ever do modern societies observe all the above aspects at the same time; they attach more importance to just one or a few instead of all of them (Korthals 2002).

Food is definitely an inseparable and defining element of culture in which people grow up and form their identity. Culinary tradition is rooted in both individual and collective memories and constitutes the attachment to individual and common legacies. Foodways as well as a language, clothes and ethnic cultural rituals are significant elements in the process of diasporic identity formation. As Garg and Khushu–Lahiri (2012: 80) argue, “food associated with an ethnic community becomes the quintessential marker of identity.” The well-known traditional saying: “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are” often becomes a social fact in ethnic communities (Gabaccia 1998). According to Wilk, food has become a symbol of both individual identity and group identity and laid the foundations of individuality

and a sense of common belonging to a bounded group (1999: 244). Food practices heighten the sense of identity because each regional community or a nation has its own dietary habits and specific cuisine that set it apart from others and make it identifiable. Among numerous examples is Camembert that has been seen as the symbol of French national identity or rice that identifies the Japanese (Holtzman 2006). It is true that culinary preferences and repetitive food rituals mark diasporic members living far from their geographic home, which they were either displaced from or which they left willingly for financial or socio-political reasons. Food and dietary practices make community members form their own identity through their own food choices and practices. They are a significant point of reference in identity formation because eating habits and food preferences formed in infancy are not likely to change and become an important mark of our ethnic belonging. As Mintz (1996: 24) argues, “food preferences, once established, are usually deeply resistant to change.” Thus, dietary habits are closely tied to the notion of memory and evoke recollection of a lost homeland, childhood or family not only cognitive but also physical and emotional (Holtzman 2006: 5-6). Sarah Sceats (2000: 1) emphasises the significance of food “in the definition of family, class and ethnicity.” This part of ethnic identity consists of influences people used to be exposed to in their family home, region or homeland. The recollections of traditional dishes, ingredients or dietary behaviours operate on both the personal and social levels. As Lupton (1994) puts it, memories of the individual are important as such but they are also a “cultural construction” that serves to show the social relationships and shared cultural experiences.

Food can bring various ethnic groups together, which is noticeable especially during multicultural get-togethers, where the served food stems from different ethnic communities. It can also differentiate ethnic groups because there are religious, cultural and social rules according to which certain foods can be eaten, whereas others must be excluded, for example in Islam, where the religion forbids people to eat pork. Distinctive dishes, traditional ingredients, tastes and smells of a homeland set apart a diasporic community from the host society. Caroline Adams (1987: 39) in her book recounts a story of first-generation Bangladeshi migrants in London and says that the smell of curry made their diaspora recognizable among others: “(...) it was in 1925. I asked a policeman where all the Indian men lived, and he said, ‘I don’t know, you’d better go on till you smell curry.’”

Another important thing is that food can contribute to clashes between cultures and can pose problems between individuals. At times food stigmatizes ethnic groups and can even lead to the social exclusion when immigrants try to stick to their own eating habits and traditional cuisine that have shaped them instead of accepting food habits and culinary preferences of the

majority. Warren Belasco (2002: 2) rightly states that “[f]ood choices establish boundaries and borders.” Not only beliefs but also food rituals, among others food etiquette, table manners, use of utensils, etc., can contribute to the erection of cultural and religious boundaries between communities (see e.g. Bahloul 1989). However, these borders are sometimes crossed because migration can necessitate considerable changes of traditional eating habits because of the unavailability of ingredients used in traditional dishes, high prices, change of lifestyle or just a mere desire “to eat the ‘Other’”, which can both concern western eaters tasting ethnic cuisine or immigrants eating the food of the majority society (Belasco 2002; Donkin, Dowler 2002; Hadley et al. 2010).

2. Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*

In his *New Ethnicities* Stuart Hall (2005: 442) is critical of Thatcher’s policies, which resulted in positioning blacks as the unspoken and marginalized “other” of predominantly white cultural discourse.” He rightly emphasizes the crucial role of immigrant writers who since the ‘70s have been focusing on problems of their own ethnic communities and in that way contested “a literary monopoly” of white artists. Black cultural representations as well as the theme of multiculturalism in Britain, which was rare before, have played an important role in British fiction and, as King puts it (2004: 1), have changed it considerably “in subject matter and sensitivities as historically significant as earlier shifts in sensibility given such names as Romanticism, Victorianism and Modernism.” James Procter (2006: 12) states that with time Black British fiction became a mainstream interest and opened the experience of blacks in Britain to a wider audience. He convincingly argues that immigrant writers gave a new perspective on minority communities living in Britain, who before were better known for rioting than writing. Those who used to be marginalized definitely became more recognizable but still far from being fully assimilated into the host society.

Undoubtedly, Monica Ali’s debut novel *Brick Lane* provides valuable information about Bangladeshi immigrants and their cultural background. Ali is a Bangladeshi-British novelist born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, who arrived in England at the age of three. Her book was still awaiting publication when it became an overnight success and placed her among twenty Best Young British Novelists chosen by *Granta Magazine* (Abu-Jaber 2003: 25). The novel received a number of favourable reviews for making Bangladeshis more familiar to white Londoners. The East End of London, where Tower Hamlets, i.e. the centre of Bangladeshi diaspora, is located, was usually perceived as “London’s dark and dangerous Other, where

poverty, crimes and aliens were gathered” (Eade 2016: 29). As Lane puts it (2003), the borough of Tower Hamlets used to be the place “invisible to the rest of London.” It is Monica Ali who has managed to uncover this under-represented world and placed ethnic diversity in a more favourable light. When the book was published, some critics admitted that the novel let them learn more about the people who were their next-door neighbours and their culture (e.g. Southmayd 2015: 91). Gilroy (2004: xi) adopts a similar approach and persuasively argues that the novel has developed “the ability to live with alterity without becoming anxious, fearful and violent.”

Brick Lane focuses on “a slice of the [Bangladeshi] world” (Abu-Jaber 2003: 28) where the protagonist makes her way through alien London experiencing physical and spiritual displacement and a growing sense of alienation. The plot revolves around the story of an eighteen-year-old Bangladeshi girl that arrives in London to join her middle-aged husband Chanu who has been living in England for about twenty years. They live in Tower Hamlets in London’s East End perceived by Nazneen the same way as by white Londoners: “[A place] thick with the smell from the overflowing communal bins” where “(...) the streets were stacked with rubbish, entire kingdoms of rubbish piled high as fortresses with only the border skirmishes of plastic bottles and grease-stained cardboard to separate them” (13, 43)¹. This dreary picture of Banglatown is exacerbated by other disturbing facts: high unemployment rate, considerable violence and overcrowded flats: “[Bangladeshi immigrants] bring over their relatives and pack them in like little fish in a tin. It’s a Tower Hamlets official statistic: three point five Bangladeshis to one room” (39). Really unhappy and full of a sense of social exclusion due to her Bengali origin, the protagonist retains a connection with her homeland through the correspondence with her sister and nostalgic memories of her childhood years spent in Bangladesh.

Academic criticism of Ali’s novel has centred mainly on the issues of race and ethnicity so far (cf. Perfect 2014; Procter 2006), but failed to mention gender being also a significant issue the writer tackles in *Brick Lane*. Sunita Sinha is one of those who realize that the value of the novel lies in the representation of gender and admits that “Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* is the first novel to focus almost exclusively on the lives of Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets” (2008: 233). The book traces the life of Nazneen, who does not dare resist arranged marriage and dutifully joins her older husband in London. Despite terribly missing her homeland and family, she does not fight against her fate. Spivak (1988) would call her

¹ Unless stated otherwise, all numbers of pages in brackets are taken from Ali (2003).

subaltern, which is a term she coined in her article about marginalized minority people, who are subordinate in status and rank regardless of their gender, age, ethnic and cultural origin, and have difficulty in articulating their needs and feelings in the host society. She asserts that subalternity is strongly related to women in minority communities who are “even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak 1998: 287). However, this term cannot be used in reference to Nazneen as she resigns herself to her fate and finds it hard to articulate her feelings and emotional experiences only in the beginning. In the course of the novel she goes through the process of empowerment, which results in her ability to control her own life and become independent of her husband. The novel displays Nazneen’s identity formation and transformation from a submissive girl into the mother of two daughters involved in the love affair with a young Muslim activist, who actively participates in the assemblies of the local militant group “Bengal Tigers.”

As it was mentioned earlier, the issue of race and ethnicity in *Brick Lane* has been widely explored by literary critics. However, far too little attention has been paid to the essential role of food and foodways in the novel, which are also a means of expressing identity and help elicit a sense of home Nazneen left behind.

3. The role of food in the novel

3.1. Social function

As mentioned before food plays a significant role in maintaining relationships and strengthening mutual bonds. Simmel illustrates this point clearly. He highlights the meaning of communal meals, which may have the healing power to fix broken relationships: “[c]ommunal eating and drinking, which can even transform a mortal enemy into a friend,” and also points at social or family get-togethers, religious feasts and even mystic meals, like the Holy Communion in the Catholic Church, which become the carriers of identity and deepen the sense of belonging to a particular community (Frisby, Featherstone 1997: 131).

Quite soon after Nazneen’s arrival in London, her husband invites Dr Azad, a prominent member of the Bangladeshi community, who fills Chanu with admiration, to dinner. The description of the meal preparation reveals how much attention Nazneen pays to every single detail of the forthcoming get-together despite the fact that Dr Azad will be the only guest. She has prepared some of the dishes but still “[t]here was the dal to make, and the vegetable dishes, the spices to grind, the rice to wash, and the sauce to prepare for the fish that

Chanu would bring this evening” (8). The fact that there will be no more guests does not seem to matter. Nazneen prepares dinner with great care, which displays its importance and significance of strengthening mutual relationships with other members of the community. Indeed, as Parasecoli states (2014: 420), celebratory meals “strengthen a sense of belonging through specific ingredients, dishes, and practices from the migrants’ place of origin.” The choice of foods and the methods of preparation displayed in the above description are part of Nazneen’s own culture shared by the people who belong to the diaspora. Upholding her own tradition is so important for the protagonist that she safeguards it whenever it is possible. She is very indignant seeing her husband drinking alcohol and is not going to tolerate a further relaxation of culinary and religious rules. Despite the fact that they have been living in Britain for some time now, Nazneen remains resilient to the influences of the host culture and rigidly sticks to Bengali culinary tradition.

Apart from carefully prepared dishes, Nazneen attaches great importance to more formal norms relating to the aesthetic role of food. She lays the tablecloth that she wants to be spotless and carefully cleans the glasses rubbing them with some paper to make them shine. Nazneen does not care about such details on a daily basis. Indeed, it is the socialization of the meal that places it far beyond the naturalism of eating and puts it on a higher aesthetic level (Frisby, Featherstone 1997). The fact that the guests meet at a predetermined time and the host, like Nazneen, follows some fixed rules concerning table manners and keeps to a firm plan is influenced to a great extent by the socialism of eating rather than the individual role of food (Ibid.).

Nazneen uses traditional ingredients bought in the nearby corner shop to prepare her dishes that she names in the vernacular. Ingredients purchased in the same local shop “stacked with kebabs, tandoori chicken, bhajis, puris, trays of rice and vegetables, milky sweets, sugar-shined ladoos, the faintly sparkling jelabees” (400), where the other diasporic members do their shopping, the same choice of dishes and cooking rituals definitely strengthen ethnic ties. According to Parasecoli (2014: 419), this “establishes the ‘communal’ aspects of the experience.” There is even more than that. Brick Lane is also cramped with plenty of restaurants serving ethnic food not only to the Bangladeshi diasporic members but also to white Londoners, who may be into Oriental culture. Among these places are really expensive and elegant restaurants “with starched white tablecloths and multitudes of shining silver cutlery,” but also more ordinary ones with clippings from newspapers and magazines in the restaurant windows and waiters in oil-marked shirts (206). What links them all is not only traditional Bangladeshi cuisine but also the look: all of the ethnic restaurants are embellished

with pendants in traditional green and red – the colours of the Bangladeshi flag, and in some of them there are statues of Hindu gods and goddesses. Despite the fact that they are not praised in Islam, the statues are exhibited in the restaurant windows to show the ties with the Indian subcontinent and to attract white customers.

The ethnic identity in the Bangladeshi diaspora is perpetuated by consuming traditional foods and performing similar food rituals. That confirms what Garg and Khushu–Lahiri (2012: 74) say about the role of food in bringing the community together: “Through the repetitive ritual of food preparation and consumption the immigrants perpetuate their ethnic identity – this daily rite becomes the crucial link between the binaries of home and abroad, the past with the present, and the imagined with the real.” Nazneen herself realizes how close the people in her community are due to the same culinary behaviours and preferences. When she opens the window, she can smell curry being cooked, which reminds of her early years at home. It is also natural for her neighbours to pop in to borrow some spices or other ingredients necessary to cook traditional Indian dishes. This proximity of the diasporic members and frequent visits of her female neighbours are really comforting for her, therefore she really worries if the tense social situation after the 9/11 terrorist attack will not ruin this social bond.

3.2. Individual role

3.2.1. Food as a symbol of love, consolation and sensual pleasure

When Nazneen and Chanu’s son is sick and has to be taken to hospital, Nazneen keeps a constant vigil by his hospital bedside. The fact that Chanu prepares a traditional meal by himself and brings it to the hospital is a sign of his love for Nazneen.

The deliciously-smelling dish full of oriental spices and traditional Bengali ingredients makes a lasting impression on the people who are also taking care of their ill relatives: “The warm, heady smell of spices blanketed the air, twitched noses and lifted heads” (96). The meal plays a comforting role because Nazneen can feel at home while eating the traditional Bangladeshi dish prepared with tender loving care. What is more, it helps her ease her worry and despair and “dumb her mind” (98) for a moment: “Nazneen ate and ate. She scraped the tins clean and put them on the floor” (96). She invites her close friend, who has come to the hospital to visit Nazneen and her son, to join her for the meal. It will also be consoling for her and for a short moment will make her focus on a pleasant conversation with Razia. Hearing that her son is a bit better, she is “eating like a zealot” (104) and the aromatic and appetizing meal gives her immense pleasure, which Hope compares to sensual, close-to-erotic pleasure

(2013: 4): “The rice was superb. (...) fresh coriander made her swoon for the chicken. The deeply oily aubergine beckoned lasciviously. She wanted to stick her tongue in the velvety dal” (104). Rice is the food that Nazneen associates with great sensual pleasure that makes people “lie down and groan with satisfaction” (104). Eating the food hungrily satisfies her sensual desires to some extent and gives her the internal power she has not felt before.

3.2.2. Food as a rebellion

Another function of food that is displayed in the novel is that of a rebellion against fate that according to her mother’s teaching was immutable and that Nazneen was tutored to resign herself to.

She is really unhappy in her marriage because Chanu focuses more on himself than on his wife and remains indifferent to her needs. In her marriage she has limited opportunities to satisfy her desires. Her husband has always regarded her as “better than no wife”, actually an ordinary, “unspoilt” village girl who is a good worker rather than a wife. Speaking to his friend, he describes her as “[n]ot beautiful, but no so ugly either. (...) Not tall. Not short. (...) Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough (...) to carry children (17). For long Nazneen has let the fate rule her life and has accepted her role of a mute sufferer because she was brought up to believe that women are inferior to men. Since she cannot express her desires openly, she finally comes up with a different form of expression: she starts to avoid common meals with Chanu. Her husband constantly reminds her of how important is to have regular meals while being pregnant, so as a form of protest she eats alone in the day or at night: “’Eat! Eat!’ her husband told her at mealtimes. But for him she would not. She showed her self-restraint like this. Her self-denial. She wanted to make it visible. It became a habit, then a pleasure, taking solace in these midnight meals” (62).

Her visible self-restraint and rebellion against Chanu’s dictates is a starting point of regaining her agency that will allow her to control her own life instead of being a submissive wife. She reformulates her identity after the 9/11 terrorist attacks when she comprehends that the host society treats Muslims as aliens and potentially dangerous people. Another experience that helps her reject her traditional role of a dutiful woman and turn into an independent woman who can decide about her own life and set up her own business is an affair with young Islamic activist Karim. Redefinition of her identity raises her self-esteem and makes her focus on her own aspirations and desires. She also develops her critical thinking and is able to decide about her and her children’s lives. She discovers her individual agency and determines her fate

herself. She firmly tells her daughters: “We’ll decide what to do” (402). The power that grows in her allows her to redefine her identity and affects her dietary habits as well: she quits controlling her food consumption and indulges in eating. She feels free to make her own decisions and it is only her who controls her and her daughters’ fate. Her agency is exemplified during the meeting with Karim when Nazneen wants a baked potato “enormous and covered in melted cheese” although “there was no reason to be eating in the middle of the afternoon” (378). Nazneen undergoes a transformation from an obedient wife to an independent woman who enjoys her agency, like shown towards the end of the novel: “[Nazneen] took more rice. She took more dal. She offered more to her daughters” (402). When her daughters ask her about their future life either in Dhaka or in London, she excludes her husband and says firmly that the decision will be only theirs: “Staying or going, it’s up to us three” (402).

3.2.3. Food as a source of pride

The quality of ethnic food that Nazneen cooks for her family and traditional natural ingredients she uses make her feel her ethnic cuisine is superior to the food of the host culture.

This is evident in the scene above quoted, when Chanu brings to the hospital some food that he has prepared by himself. The rich oriental aroma that wafts all over the hospital room makes the visitors to the hospitalized patients stare open-mouthed in surprise and lick their lips hungrily. As shown in the novel, hardly ever can Bangladeshi immigrants feel admired by the host society. They rather experience social exclusion and are treated as inferior. The scene in the hospital not only clearly displays the superiority of ethnic to English cuisine but also the significance of upholding cultural roots. Another time when the dominance of Bangladeshi cooking is confirmed is when Nazneen is having some local yoghurt bought in a nearby supermarket. The moment she takes a tub of yoghurt from the fridge, she recollects her childhood days back in Bangladesh when her mother used to make fresh, “thick and sweet and warm” (62) yoghurt at home. The plastic pot of the yoghurt “from the plastic English cows” (62) compares unfavourably with the natural one of her mother’s.

Another scene that demonstrates the superiority of Nazneen’s traditional culinary habits is the picnic in St. James’s Park, London. The description of a wide range of the sophisticated dishes that Nazneen has cooked by herself is really impressive:

Chicken wings spread in a paste of yoghurt and spices and baked in the oven, onions sliced to the thickness of a fingernail, mixed with chillies, dipped in gram flour and egg and fried in

bubbling oil, a dry concoction of chickpeas and tomatoes stewed with cumin and ginger, misshapen chapattis wrapped while still hot in tinfoil and sprinkled now with condensation, golden hard-boiled eggs glazed in a curry seal, Dairylea triangles in their cardboard box, bright orange packets containing shamelessly orange crisps, a cake with a list of ingredients too long to be printed in legible type. (246)

Also the display of the dishes is absolutely stunning and eye-catching. In no way can their picnic food be compared to this of the native British. Nazneem arranges the food as if she was laying the table in her own kitchen. The fact that she puts the food on paper plates, lays out plastic cups and places them all on tea towels definitely enhances the aesthetic appeal of the meal. Nazneem can again feel her superiority to all those who will pick fast food or home-made sandwiches and beer for a picnic and will not care about the proper and aesthetic food arrangement. Instead, they will eat their food straight from their paper bags and swig their beer from the bottle without caring about cutlery and crockery. The scene in the park is yet another evidence how much attention Nazneem devotes to preserving Bengali culinary practices and to proudly exhibiting her home culture in the host country.

Nazneem experiences a similar culture clash when she is walking beyond Brick Lane. What strikes her at first glance is the lack of green areas, high-rise modern buildings made of steel and glass and crowded streets, where getting to the other side of the street “without being hit by a car was like walking out in the monsoon and hoping to dodge the raindrops” (43). She also notices how different from her own is the host culinary culture. Like in the picnic scene, she meets people who hastily eat their lunches straight from white paper bags or just paper without caring about the aesthetic side of their consumption and limiting it to the mere physiological level. It comes as a surprise to her that they even do not sit down while eating but walk all the time to save time. What is more, they eat nothing more than ordinary sandwiches as if nutritional value of meals does not matter at all. She is amazed seeing a man who has eaten up his sandwich in four large bites (47) or another person on the bus “with a meal wrapped in paper” (82). This experience makes her proud of her own cultural values. She shares her husband’s view about the superiority of their own heritage. Chanu disdainfully speaks about the host culture boiling it down to “[t]elevision, pub, throwing darts, kicking a ball” (210). At the same time, he emphasises the strength of their own saying that “our own culture is strong” (209), which Nazneem agrees with.

3.2.4. *Food in nostalgic memories*

Most members of the London Bangladeshi diaspora displayed in the novel share their cultural values with the rest of their community and uphold their tradition. This enables them to retain emotional bonds with their homeland they miss terribly. Many of them suffer from what Dr Azad calls “Going Home Syndrome”. In his definition, being an immigrant in a new and often unfriendly community evokes a sense of nostalgia for their home left in the Indian subcontinent. A lot of them have already settled into their routine in London but they have never quitted their nostalgic memories of the past years in Bangladesh. As Dr Azad puts it, “[t]heir bodies are here but their hearts are back there” (24). Despite the fact that they live in a new country, their lives are still defined by the past and they are unable to fully assimilate into the majority society. Dr Azad compares their lifestyle to “just recreating the villages [in England]” (24). By preserving their cultural tradition, wearing traditional clothes, speaking their language, cooking traditional dishes and performing the same culinary rituals, they still keep a spiritual and emotional bond with Bangladesh.

The term nostalgia, which basically conjures up the images of a time gone by, relates to bittersweet recollections of past events that have some emotional value (e.g. Wilson 2005: 21; Mills, Coleman 1994). Bittersweetness of nostalgia relates to the double meaning of the concept where nostalgia is seen as a painful experience because the home that an individual longs for is far away. On the other hand, this pain is deadened by happy, affectionate memories of the home and childhood spent in the homeland (e.g. Wilson 2005).

In the novel nostalgia for the past way of life is displayed in various ways, for example through Nazneen’s recall of traditional culinary rituals and the choice of food back in Bangladesh. Whenever her memories of food and consumption practices in her family home in the Indian subcontinent come flooding back, she feels again an emotional connection with her family and childhood times in Bangladesh, where the food was better, more natural and nutritious than this available in London. At times, what she used to eat in her Bengali home achieves special prominence, like rice that Nazneen calls “the giver of life” (104). Food and dietary tradition that Nazneen and other diasporic members follow strengthen a sense of belonging to the Bangladeshi diaspora. They help to develop collective identity among the immigrants who feel isolated in the majority society and for whom uprootedness is still hard to accept. Food memories provide Nazneen with some comfort, “a palliative for dislocation” (Mannur 2010: 117), which she needs in a new place, where she is overwhelmed by homesickness and finds it hard to assimilate into the dominant society.

Once related only to homesickness and disempowerment or even inability to deal with daily duties properly, with time nostalgia began to be regarded in a more positive light (Hage 2010: 416-417). Nazneen's nostalgic culinary memories are not only a deep yearning for the past but also constitute a more constructive force. Her nostalgia arouses warm feelings and makes Nazneen create imaginary refuge, where she can feel homely and safe. Nostalgia as a constructive force empowers Nazneen to take control of her life and to seek the satisfaction of her needs while living a happy life in London without her husband, who is going back to Dhaka (Ibid.).

4. Conclusion

The paper concludes by arguing that food and foodways displayed in *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali play a number of different roles beyond a pure physiological function. In the novel both the social and individual functions of food are exemplified. Culinary rituals and traditional recipes passed down to younger generations are not a burden but a way of communication among diasporic members and cementing ethnic ties. Culinary practices deep in tradition contribute to the cultural continuity in the diaspora. They strengthen ethnic bonds and allow people to recognize others as the members of their own community.

In its individual aspect food plays a significant psychological function since it is a way of expressing love and dealing with destructive emotions. It provides Nazneen with the partial satisfaction of her sensual needs that feels in her unhappy marriage. Food becomes a source of ethnic pride for the main character of the novel but also constitutes an emotional bridge between Nazneen and her homeland, where she left her family. All the culinary situations and nostalgic culinary memories accompany the process of Nazneen's transformation from a submissive wife to an independent woman. Her nostalgia and deep ethnic ties lead to Nazneen's agency and initiate the process of the redefinition of her identity and reassembling "her broken history into a new whole" (Stewart 1992: 261).

The multiplicity of food functions both in the social and individual aspects constitutes confirmation of the views on food as the multi-layered concept, held by some scholars e.g. Highfield (2017: 157) who argues that "[t]he food people eat and the way it is prepared speaks volumes about their relationship to the culture, their place in society, and their interaction with the environment."

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