

## Gendered Cultural Authenticity and the Politics of Belonging in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation*

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### Abstract

*This article examines the gendered production of cultural authenticity and belonging in Monica Ali's Brick Lane and Jean Kwok's Girl in Translation. Rather than treating diasporic identity as a stable negotiation between two intact cultures, the study reads authenticity as a social claim made through unequal relations of gender, generation, class, language, and migration. Drawing on Uma Narayan's critique of cultural essentialism and the "package picture" of cultures, Susan Moller Okin's account of internal gender inequality, Ofelia Schutte's work on cultural alterity, and Nira Yuval-Davis's distinction between belonging and the politics of belonging, the article compares the ways Nazneen and Kimberly are asked to embody culturally legible forms of femininity. In Brick Lane, the language of the "unspoiled" village woman, communal respectability, female mobility, and Karim's construction of Nazneen as "the real thing" reveal how authenticity is attached selectively to women's conduct. In Girl in Translation, expectations surrounding the "good Chinese girl," filial gratitude, family labour, language, and romantic behaviour similarly turn femininity into a measure of cultural continuity. Yet neither novel reduces cultural belonging to oppression. Both protagonists retain attachments to family, memory, language, and community while revising the terms on which those attachments organize their lives. The comparison shows that belonging becomes meaningful when it is separated from demands for cultural purity and linked instead to the women's capacity to inhabit, revise, and combine social worlds without surrendering self-definition.*



**Keywords:** cultural authenticity, belonging, diaspora, gender, cultural essentialism, Brick Lane, Girl in Translation

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Women are a central figure in the intersection of conflicting definitions of culture in multicultural and diasporic fiction. Often the queries surrounding dress, marriage, sexuality, domestic obligations, language, paid work, education and childrearing are questions about whether a woman still fits into the family, community and inherited way of life. This isn't because women simply represent culture in a straightforward way. Instead, their daily decisions have some very significant symbolic implications. Work, dress, peers, freedom of movement, and love can all be interpreted as assimilation or betrayal of culture, whereas other social changes are ordinary adaptations. The politics of belonging is thus played out in the process of making selective judgments of what matters, who gets authority to make these judgments, and whose behavior is read as evidence of cultural preservation or loss. The process is explored differently, but similarly, in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation* (2010). Nazneen, a young woman from a rural part of Bangladesh, comes to London on an arranged marriage. Her childhood is structured by a learned ethic of endurance, a curtailed domesticity, reliance on Chanu, and limited English. Kimberly Chang moves to Brooklyn with her mom, and gets caught up in a new world of obligation. Although she is a child, she takes on the responsibility of caring for her family long before she is an adult due to poverty, factory work, language brokering, the desire for education, and relying on Aunt Paula. The protagonists are not from a shared cultural background nor at a comparable point in their lives and the comparison does not presume the Bangladeshi British experience as being interchangeable with that of the Chinese American. The novels share a common theme: cultural identity is always written in the terms of gender configuration, and the women are always made to understand that one cannot simply accept a cult without questioning it.

Both novels "reveal cultural authenticity as a constructed, as a gendered, and not an inherited, concept," the study states. The ideals of feminised respectability, family loyalty, thankfulness, and cultural continuity are judged through the character of Nazneen and Kimberly, but the texts also situate these ideals amidst material conditions of complication. Racial animosity and class disparity, exploitative labour, linguistic marginalization, housing

insecurity, unequal institutional access are not just episodic outside details; they define the kinds of cultural defensiveness and family dependence that the protagonists must navigate. The women don't "have to" decide between cultures to attain belonging. They negotiate belonging by selective continuity, that is, maintaining relationships and practices that are meaningful to them and rejecting claims that render culture as a script for women's behaviour. It is an approach that transcends the already known diaspora model that refers to "home and host. According to Avtar Brah (1996), diaspora is not simply a binary of origin and destination, such relation should be understood as historically specific relation of difference, power, and location. Advocates of the concept of belonging, such as Yuval-Davis (2006), also distinguish between the emotional aspect of belonging and the politics of drawing boundaries as to who belongs and who does not, and under which conditions. Such distinctions are particularly helpful in the interpretation of the two novels, as both protagonists owe allegiance to others and to practices that simultaneously call for them to give of themselves. The difficulty for them isn't culture per se. It is the quest to make culture legitimate if it conforms to certain gendered roles.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender, migration and cultural identity have been identified as a key aspect to Nazneen's development and have been a key aspect to *Brick Lane* itself upon a few times. Poon (2009) approaches the novel by considering the provisional nature of migrant knowledge: the novel can be read as a process of partial and everyday exploration of the knowledge of self and London, rather than a moment of liberation. Hasan (2018), on the other hand, centers on transplanted gender norms and how diasporic patriarchy tries to replicate acts of female seclusion in a British context while they are becoming ever more unsustainable. The issue of tension between marriage, desire, religion and identity is explored by Prasasti (2018), while hybridity way of thinking and third space identity is explored by the way Yousef (2019) interprets the novel. In this respect, Rezaie (2016) is especially pertinent to the current research as he sees the novel as being both about female autonomy and about the danger of painting a picture of Bangladeshi culture based on an overly liberal opposition between freedom and tradition. All of this scholarship demonstrates the need to not assume any homogeneity of Bangladeshi culture when discussing gendered constraint in *Brick Lane*.



The scholarship on *Girl in Translation* also emphasises the intersection of immigrant identity, class, education, language and labour. Gasztold (2021) places Kwok's novel in the migrant narrative tradition and highlights the experiences of women immigrants from China, such as socio-economic aboveground and the adaptation cost. Tuffahati and Suardi (2025) explore female identity in relation to power dynamics, and how cultural and gender norms influence Kimberly's actions. Uysal and Kuleli (2026) address the aspect of child language brokering, the language skills play a significant part in Kimberly's authority in her family as it entails additional responsibilities for her mom. Through these studies, it is determined that Kimberly's identity is created by several social locations. The present article builds on this scholarship by posing the question of how these places are structured and determined in terms of cultural authenticity and belonging. The main critique of cultural essentialism is given by Narayan's work. A feminist analysis can do the very thing it decries essentialize and divide the very same thing it seeks to combat: to view "Western" and "Third World" cultures as internally homogenous and mutually exclusive. Cultural essentialism 'locks' practices down as fixed properties, thus rendering disagreements, historical shifts, class disparities, gender antagonisms, and unequal power relations among community members invisible. Her subsequent description of the "package picture" of cultures makes the issue even more clear: cultures are modes of imagining a package with a fixed content, while cultures are places of borrowing, contestation, transformation and plurality (Narayan, 2000). The picture of a package is particularly deceptive in diaspora, where the migration puts on display the porosity of cultural borders. This is also very much related to what Narayan calls selective labelling. In her talk on cultural preservation, Narayan (2000) suggests that those in power can consider some of the changes to be compatible with cultural continuity while other changes are cultural loss and betrayal. The problem isn't only that cultures change; it's that the change is called something different, depending on the adjudicator. Women are set repeatedly within this selective process in both novels. Employment, education, clothing, mobility, marriage, sexuality and language can serve as indicators of proper attachment to the community, while male migration, change of occupation, consumption and technological adaptations do not necessarily carry such symbolic connotations.

Another component of the framework is found in Okin's (1998) work on feminism and multiculturalism. Her main argument is that cultural groups are not internally equalitarian and that women's interests may be lost because of seeing culture groups. This knowledge helps to analyse family authority in both novels. It is important, however, to put Okin in dialogue with Narayan and Schutte (2016) rather than relying exclusively on Okin's argument as *Brick Lane* is being given a liberal twist to it. As emphasized by Schutte (1998), the focus is on cultural alterity and unequal conditions for characterizing another cultural subject. Her critical analysis warns of a model where Western feminist categories serve as the neutral standard, and minority women feature as objects of rescue. Instead, the goal is not to forbid criticism of patriarchy, but to acknowledge the interpretive process as playing out within histories of power.

With Yuval-Davis's (2006) distinction between belonging and the politics of belonging, the article is able to make this connection between these feminist debates and the emotional and social attachments which are represented in the novels. Belonging refers to social places, identities, feelings of attachment and ethical-political values, while politics of belonging is about projects that delineate membership and entitlement. A woman can thus feel very attached, to family, to language, to religion, to food, to memory, to the community, and to a political claim, as to what should or should not be done by a "proper" member of one's community. This understanding is more helpful than others in understanding how Nazneen's ultimate decision not to return to Bangladesh can't be seen as a denial of Bangladeshi identity, and why Kimberly's quest for Yale doesn't remove her connection to her mother or the Chinese language. The novels have been explored in relation to identity, gender and hybridity, labour, language, adaptation and agency in the literature mentioned above. A more understated comparative relation between gendering cultural authenticity and politics of belonging. This study thus poses three questions:

- a) How do the novels make women responsible for performing culturally recognizable femininity?
- b) How are cultural authenticity and belonging shaped by family, community, class, language, and host-Society Institutions?
- c) How do Nazneen and Kimberly revise belonging without simply abandoning inherited attachments?



### 3. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study employs comparative qualitative textual analysis to examine representations of gendered cultural authenticity and belonging in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation*. The novels are viewed as fictional portrayals, not as testimony to actual sociological communities of Bangladeshi British or Chinese American people. The analysis focuses on scenes in which women's behaviour is mediated in terms of culture, respectability, family loyalty, gratitude, mobility, work, education, language, sexuality, and generational obligation. Social and institutional contexts of those judgements such as racism, class inequality, migrant labour, housing, schooling and linguistic access are also discussed. The principal analytical framework is that of Narayan's notion of cultural essentialism and selective labelling, while questions of gender, cultural alterity, diaspora and belonging are thrown into perspective by Okin, Schutte, Brah and Yuval-Davis. The comparative approach is not based on a shared notion of diasporic womanhood and rather looks at how femininity and authenticity are articulated and negotiated within varying cultural, family, economic, and institutional contexts. Selected passages, character interactions, narrative developments and recurring representations of cultural obligation and self-definition in the two texts are interpreted using close reading.

### 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Gendered Authenticity and the "Real" Diasporic Woman

At the beginning of *Brick Lane*, Nazneen is already positioned inside a gendered narrative of cultural value. Chanu describes her to another person as "*an unspoilt girl. From the village*" (Ali, 2004, p. 34). The words extol more than innocence. It equates femininity with being geographically, and culturally, far from the present urban experience. The word "unspoilt" suggests that damage may be caused by contact, mobility, education, sexuality, or public independence. Nazneen's village background is proof of governability, domestic know-how, and cultural purity. One element of Chanu's satisfaction is that he believes that he has not developed the tendencies that would threaten his authority. This idea is more developed when Chanu talks about why Nazneen must not go out alone. While claiming to be "*westernized*" (Ali, 2004, p.

65), he insists that community surveillance is important because of the possibility of encountering her on the streets, which he believes is where he belongs. The contradiction is significant. Although Chanu is described as modern and educated, his masculinity requires Nazneen to act in a way that will signal her female respectability to others in the community. Her mobility is thus not just a personal affair, but an object of evidence about his masculinity and the family's cultural value. The politics of belonging are the politics of observation, gossip and management of reputation.

Selective labeling accounts for the asymmetry as in Narayan's (2000) account. In London, Chanu's life consists of his education in England, his work in the public sector, consumer items, English literature, TV, and constant future visions of promotion. These changes do not "make him culturally inauthentic. However, Nazneen's ambition to learn English or move around is seen as socially risky or unnecessary. When she says, "*I would like to learn some English,*" Chanu answers, "*Where's the need anyway?*" (Ali, 2004, p. 53). The issue is not that adaptation is rejected in principle. Adaptation is selective. Some of the changes reinforce Chanu's sense of himself as both educated and modern, and some changes in Nazneen's situation threaten the domestic order that underpins this sense. Chanu is not just a representative of Bangladeshi men. Razia's choices, Hasina's history, Shahana's resistance, Mrs Islam's authority, and Karim's politics reveal competing models of gender and belonging. Though the novel, as Hasan (2018) puts it, possesses "*transplanted gender norms,*" the instability of transplantation is repeatedly demonstrated within the novel. This so-called cultural continuity is already being reshaped in London, in the context of what is on offer in terms of employment, racism, generation change and community anxiety.

As Karim's relationship with Nazneen brings into sharp focus the question of authenticity. He categorizes women into simple categories: the "*westernized girl*" and the "*religious girl,*" then tells Nazneen, "You are the real thing" (Ali, 2004, p. 535). Although his words seem praiseworthy in that they take her out of the realm of stereotypes he despises, they simply trade one label for another. Therefore, the image of Nazneen as a character who is unaffected by the compromises of that British-bred life in the diaspora gives her authenticity. There is a cultural fantasy in Karim's desire, in his need in her for an origin that holds him steady in his uncertain relationship with Bangladesh and British Muslim identity.



Ali makes this dream fantasy unrealistic when Nazneen realizes that “*she was not the girl from the village anymore. She was not the real thing*” (Ali, 2004, p. 537). The sentence does not represent the loss of culture. It is a denial of Karim's definition. Nazneen has altered with marriage and motherhood, bereavement, work, sexuality, friendship, language and life in London. There is no pre-existing true essence to which future experience compares: no previous experience can serve as the true essence to which the later one compares or contrasts. Narayan's (1998, 2000) critique of cultural packages is now at the level of character: authenticity fails because a living subject cannot be culturally frozen.

The language of the “*good Chinese girl*” is the language of Girl in Translation, a staging of a related process. Kimberly recalls that she had always obeyed rules “*like any good Chinese girl*” (Kwok, 2010, Chapter 2, para. 129). In part, it's Kimberly's own measure. It implies goodness in obeying, success, abstaining, and deference to authority. Later, Ma tells her that it's not the thing for “*a well-behaved Chinese girl*” (Kwok, 2010, Chapter 7, para. 140). The norm functions softly in comparison to the restrictions that are exercised by Nazneen, yet it continues to gender cultural legitimacy. Good womanhood is not just a kind of social conduct, it is an ethnicised moral category. Kimberly knows that “*nice Chinese girls*” from her mother are not supposed to be going out freely (Kwok, 2010, Chapter 7, para. 192). However, the novel quickly and intricately challenges the notion of cultural explanation for her social isolation. Kimberley cannot enjoy a normal teenage life by working in the factory, living in poverty in secret, having no money, proper attire, and being afraid of revealing the illegal and exploitative situation in which she works. Class and labour reinforce what at times can seem to be culturally conservative restrictions. Gasztold (2021) is in fact very interested in this socioeconomic context of the immigrant story, and Tuffahati and Suardi (2025) demonstrate that Kimberly's femininity emerges not necessarily in the name of culture in the abstract, but in the contexts of everyday relationships of power.

The novel also shows how the dominant American image of who is an ordinary girl defines Kimberly. When she is asked to draw a girl, she believes she is being asked to draw “*a non-Chinese girl*” and she draws a blond princess figure (Kwok, 2010, Chapter 5, para. 168). The moment is small but revealing. Cultural authenticity does not operate only from within the immigrant family. Kimberly also discovers that there are visual norms for both

being American and being a girl, and that she doesn't fit in. She is evaluated on two fronts: first, in terms of the expectations of her family to be a good Chinese daughter, and second, in terms of dominant cultural images in which the unmarked girl is white.

## 4.2 Respectability, Work, and the Boundaries of Belonging

As paid work means something different to different people in different places, it is one of the most fruitful places to look for differences between novels. In *Brick Lane*, women's work is a menace to the masculinity of men, according to community gossip. The tale is repeated – Jorina starts working while her husband works, and now she brings disrepute on him. Razia rejects the logic directly: “*Will the community feed me? Will it buy footballs for my son?*” (Ali, 2004, p. 136). Her question shifts the discussion from symbolic honour to material survival. There is no cultural answer to the cost of bringing up the children, running a household and living in London.

Razia matters not simply because she is exposing the limits of what cultural authenticity can be, but because she is doing so through a voice within the diasporic community and not just by outside actors. She cuts her hair, studies English, takes paid work, wears trousers, acquires British citizenship, and remains embedded in Bangladeshi friendships and family responsibility. She disrupts the package image of culture, for the practices that she takes up do not represent cultural abandonment. Later, when she and Nazneen set up sewing work that makes up a small business, economic engagement is a location of cooperation and not a guarantee of assimilation. Towards the end of the novel, when Nazneen proposes a change in the design, and assures the buyers that they can afford to pay extra, she responds, “*Do it then. You make a design. I'll sell it*” (Ali, 2004, p. 672). The division of labour represents a new and different relationship to value: their skill is no longer merely 'domestic service' but is work that they can price and shape. Kimberly's factory labor renders the politics of labor even more prominent. The physical tone of the Chinatown garment factory, with heat, dust and child labourers. Kimberly sees that children must be part of the mix, for parents require their work, and later finds out that piece-rate work ultimately is not subject to formal labour laws that, in reality, are for the benefit of “*white people*” and not workers such as them (Kwok, 2010, Chapter 2, para. 106). The scene reveals an ambivalence of multicultural



inclusion. Kimberley is physically located in the United States, and enrolled in school, but her family's survival is contingent on labour practices that are all but invisible to the institutional world of the school. Thus, family obligation goes hand in hand with class position. Kimberly's work is a kind of filial devotion, and this is not to say that this would all be wrong. She loves her mom and is responsible for her. However, the novel makes it quite clear that affection is compulsory labour, as they are indebted due to their migration, underpaid, linguistically vulnerable, and dependent on Aunt Paula. The cultural duty cannot be divorced from the economic system that exacerbates it.

This distinction is important as Aunt Paula accuses Kimberly and Ma of being ungrateful. When Kimberly is leaving for Yale, and the family is trying to move out from under Paula's thumb, Paula remarks, "Your hearts have no roots" (Kwok, 2010, Chapter 13, para. 20). The accusation makes being resistant to exploitation cultural and familial faults. "Rootedness" is the process of ongoing representation of continual indebtedness, which Paula says is impossible to repay. She later calls migration a "life debt" (Kwok, 2010, Chapter 13, para. 38). If Kimberly and Ma don't keep playing along with Paula's "belonging" transaction, they're no longer "trashed" and no longer "coded." Ma's answer infuses that definition with confusion. "She states, 'We've already repaid our debts to you'" (Kwok, 2010, Chapter 13, para. 43). Immediately she adds that the time has come "to make our own way" (Chapter 13, para. 48). The break does not affect kinship or Chinese identity. It unites thankfulness with the habit of obeying always. This is the difference that is key to the article's argument: cultural authenticity when attachment is shifted to a limitless demand on someone else's labor and future.

### 4.3 Host-Society Recognition and the Cultural Marking of Difference

If Britain, and the United States, are regarded as neutral spaces of freedom, then a preoccupation with internal family and community expectations can easily deceptively re-essentialize the very thing that Narayan is condemning. That's an oversimplification of both novels. *Brick Lane* does not just portray a life characterised by professional disappointments and racism; it is also a story of anxiety, a fear of cultural loss on Chanu's part. He sees workplace hierarchy as a question of 'racial competition' and connects

the grievances of white workers with the National Front (Ali, 2004, p. 55). Then, to be a Muslim becomes an increasingly precarious position in the context of anti-Muslim violence and the political situation of the Bengal Tigers. All such contexts do not justify Chanu's dictatorial attitude towards Nazneen, but they could be the reason why cultural preservation may be more defensive in diaspora.

When gleaning from cultural alterity, one can turn to Schutte's (1998) account of cultural alterity, which refuses a one-way gaze. British society is not merely the observer of Bangladeshi culture, but is also involved in race, class, housing, labour and national membership relationships. As well as linguistic dependence and domestic restriction, these are also factors of Nazneen's early isolation – the impersonal architecture of Tower Hamlets, institutions she does not know, and being hard to be recognized that do not recognize her in public space. The first independent travels of the city of London, therefore, are not simply from private oppression to public liberty. These are experiences of a city where she is visible, but anonymous and socially stigmatized. Schooling, too, is one of the themes of *Girl in Translation*. Kimberly is intelligent but her teachers and peers are unable to accurately read her due to her poverty, clothing, and limited English and her lack of understanding of classroom conventions. Kimberley writes that her mother can hardly speak with the school authorities as Ma's English consists mainly of apologetic expressions (Kwok, 2010, Chapter 1, para. 85). Kimberly's fluency translates into her making the family go-ferr between the outside world and the house. She states that she "grew into the space" her mother created by being foreign from her and assumed her tax filing, complaints and returns, etc. (Kwok, 2010, Chapter 8, para. 21). Uysal and Kuleli (2026) highlight this brokering in the language of children as one of the novel's main characteristics.

Kimberly gains power with linguistic change but also acquires adult responsibilities as a child. Multicultural belonging is thus dependent on her capacity to not only translate language, but institutions. She becomes legible due to her mastery of the dominant code. Even years later her mother has an affinity with the Chinese language and language practice. Although Ma speaks little English in the last chapter, the family's situation has become economically stable and they have integrated into society (Kwok, 2010, Chapter 14, para. 96). Whether the matter is detail is key, because it questions assimilation as an indicator of successful belonging. Ma experiences a more secure and self-reliant form of life without having to be



linguistically and culturally the same. Kimberly's story also challenges the notion of a model minority. Graduation to Yale and a medical career at the end of the novel open to her, but neither is a sign of justice for the structures she endured. Despite being exceptionally skilled, her position in the factory with child labour, piece work exploitation and poor housing conditions is not acceptable. In fact, without an analysis of the interconnections between the classes, her story could be read mistakenly within the context of cultural recognition as one of China's problems to American opportunity. In doing so, Kwok challenges the classic immigrant success story, writes Gastold (2021).

#### 4.4 Rewriting Belonging Beyond Cultural Purity

The central changes in both novels are those that result from the protagonists separating out belonging from obedience. In the first, Nazneen's romance with Karim seems to provide another opportunity to escape Chanu, but Karim's idea of authenticity confines her to a new position. So, her choice not to marry him is as important as her choice not to join Chanu in Bangladesh. She refuses a man's suggestion for the next phase in her life, and another man's. This is not a denial or rejection of relationships on an individualist level. Her options are limited to her daughters, to work and to memory, and to life as she has created it in London.

This relational belonging becomes apparent at the end of *Brick Lane*. Chanu leaves, but Nazneen tells her daughters that it is “up to us three” (Ali, 2004, p. 671) whether they leave or stay. Power moves from the husband/father's alone to a small collective comprised of women with varying connection with Britain and Bangladesh. The sentence doesn't settle all of the disputes, but it alters the rules on who can select where home will be. The last ice-skating scene is even more condensed. When asked to skate, Nazneen dithers as “one can't skate in a sari” and Razia responds that in England she can do anything she wants (Ali, 2004, p. 690). The more interesting thing is, Nazneen doesn't take off the sari to get on the rink. This is a scene that challenges the notion that culture and new practice need to be mutually exclusive. Not the sari has changed, but the rule which tells her what a sari-wearing woman can do. Kimberly also challenges the concept of “belonging” by denying the notion that a commitment to family loyalty has to include a surrender of future independence. When she's accepted at Yale, her material leverage begins, but the emotional leverage starts

when she realizes that Aunt Paula's debt doesn't have to be morally binding. Ma is making a difference. It is not a case of a daughter running away from her traditional mother, but an intergenerational pact of two women who create their own redefinition of family responsibility. In contrast, the novel does not have a traditional assimilation storyline in which emancipation is dependent on separation from parents of immigrants.

This continuity can be seen in the social world of the novel's end. Kimberly becomes an surgeon and grows up her son with Ma, Chinese language and family practices are still a part of their residence. Even though she has a professional identity now, she is still a factory girl because later, Matt tells her, “You've come real far, factory girl” (Kwok, 2010, Chapter 14, para. 40). The term links achievement and the labor history that prevailing success stories might otherwise obscure. Kimberly's belongings are additive and not replacementary. She doesn't throw away her Chinese identity for the American identity; she piles up positions that are beyond the sum of these two labels. At this juncture one can usefully turn to Yuval-Davis's distinction (2006). The politics of belonging draws boundaries in the form of legitimate membership. Nazneen and Kimberly experience such limitations in families, communities, schools, workplaces and in broader national culture. But emotional belonging is a bit malleable. Nazneen can attach herself to Bangladesh and decide on London. Kimberly can retain her Chinese language, her family obligations and her duty to care for her parents, without having to accept a debt mechanism that would stop her from moving up the education ladder. Their deeds are thick, though not pure, since they make it evident of belonging.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of *Brick Lane* and *Girl in Translation* reveals that cultural authenticity is not presented as a neutral inheritance but as a gendered and contested form of social regulation. In both novels, women's conduct becomes a visible measure of cultural continuity, respectability, and collective belonging. Ali (2004) has pointed out how Chanu's description of Nazneen as an “unspoiled” village woman and Karim's subsequent construction of her as culturally authentic are imposed on the concept of diasporic femininity, which in turn is given symbolic responsibility for maintaining an imagined cultural core. A similar theme can be noticed in *Girl in*



*Translation* where Kimberly is confronted with expectations about how women must behave, how they should be loyal to their families, how they should be grateful and how they should be rooted in their culture (Kwok, 2010). Such portrayals help to undermine the cultural essentialism expressed in Narayan's (1998) critique of the tendency of modern nation states to imagine cultures as internally coherent units that have supposedly authentic values that can be uncovered and preserved. Selective labelling as defined by Narayan (2000) is also pertinent in that the novels suggest that not all social change is necessarily a sign of cultural loss, but women's decisions about work, mobility, education, relationships, and familial authority are particularly apparent in the contexts where communal continuity is felt to be under threat.

This gendering of cultural authenticity follows previous *Brick Lane* studies. For example, Hasan (2018) demonstrates how Ali's novel interrogates the transposition of gender norms from Bangladesh to the British diasporic space, and Prasasti (2018) highlights the evolving relationship between Nazneen's identity and her changing dynamic with the domestic power, desire, and gendered self. Rezaie (2016) also sees a conflict between cultural belonging and individual freedom but cautions against defining Bangladeshi culture with a simple binary against tradition and western liberation. Building on these readings, the present analysis highlights how this is not only the question of Nazneen's rejection and/or acceptance of cultural norms, but also of who has the authority to define what is culturally authentic. Although Chanu and Karim have their differences, both have their own idealized conceptions of womanhood to impose on Nazneen. By contrast, the presence of paid work, changing dress, language learning, and refusal to simply accede to communal gossip muddy the formulations with which Razia is surrounded (Ali, 2004). The presence of these positions in the same diasporic community validates Narayan's (1998) emphasis on the presence of "in-tra-cultural" conflict, not any one singular voice.

The same issue arises in *Girl in Translation* though in other cultural and material contexts. Kimberly's experience with her mother, her obligation to the family and the demands of Aunt Paula are not just about Chinese family values. Based on the current scholarship, it is already established that the construction of Kimberly's identity is in response to migration, language, class, education and cultural adaptation. Gasztold (2021) focuses on economic precarity, migrant work, class mobility, and schooling in

her re-imagining of the American immigrant narrative in the novel, whereas Ningtyas and Rosyidah (2014) analyse her experience in terms of hybridity and linguistic negotiation. The connection between the female identity and the imbalance of power in the text has also been highlighted in more recent studies, (Tuffahati & Suardi, 2025) and Uysal & Kuleli (2026) reveals that Kimberly's role as a child language broker is accompanied by practical and emotional duties within the immigrant household. The current result confirms that cultural obligation in the novel cannot be dissociated from material vulnerability as is shown in these studies. Kimberly's family loyalty is magnified by her family's dependence on Aunt Paula (Kwok, 2010), her mother's lack of English, the menial factory jobs that the family performs and the debt that is owed. The set of obligations imposed on sons and daughters as a requisite of their respectful roles in society is consequently generated in a larger economic and institutional context.

This interplay of cultural and material pressures is a very important commonality that the two novels share. Nazneen's domestic enclosure comes in the context of Chanu's stymied professional mobility, her racialized views of British society, her financial insecurity, and the surveillance of the diasporic community (Ali, 2004). Kimberly's debts build up on top of another aspect of migrant precarity: that of class inequality, linguistic disadvantage, inadequate housing, and labour in the garment factories (Kwok, 2010). Poon's (2009) interpretation of *Brick Lane* as a novel on unstable forms of migrant knowledge helps here as at the start of *Brick Lane* neither Nazneen nor Chanu is fully aware of the social structures that impact them. Similarly, Gasztold's (2021) focus on socioeconomic aspects of the biography *Girl in Translation* illustrates that difficulties of immigrants are not solely linked to cultural adjustment. When read comparatively, the novels thus defy both analyses that focus too strongly on ethnicity and gender, and those that leave labour systems, racial hierarchies, housing inequalities and institutional barriers to seem culturally neutral.

It is an important critique of Narayan's (1998, 2000) finding in a valuable direction. Granted, cultural essentialism does not deny the importance of culture, but rather the reason of why some practices called cultural, and others are seen as universal or just social. While it is fine to ascribe restrictions on women's movements, expectations surrounding marriage and concerns about daughters'



behaviour very easily can be identified as a part of diasporic culture, racism, professional exclusion and economic inequality within Britain are not so easily labelled culturally. Kimberly's obligations toward her mother might be seen as Chinese values while the forced labor of the clothing industry, the inequities of American education, and the difficulties of language acquisition might be treated as typical economic circumstances. This is because it relates to the question of "cultural alterity" raised by Schutte (1998), which challenges the notion of a "culturally neutral" perspective for observing and judging minority practices as seen from the dominant society. Both novels challenge this premise by rendering the "host society" itself as an historically and socially constructed environment.

Also, the analysis is problematic with respect to Okin's (1998, 1999) critique of multicultural accommodation. Okin is convincing, however, in arguing that disparities should not be lost in the rhetoric of cultural preservation within the family and minority community. There are various instances of gendered power in *Brick Lane* that are connected to this worry, including Nazneen's restricted mobility, Chanu's taking of most decisions, and the community's disapproval of gainful employment for women (Ali, 2004). The family authority and "gratitude" expectations, which limit Kimberly's autonomy, are also present in *Girl in Translation* (Kwok, 2010). However, the novels also endorse Narayan (1998) and Schutte's (1998) qualification: Criticism becomes reductive when minority culture can be viewed as exceptional sites of patriarchy and dominant societies are not subject to cultural analysis. Rezaie's (2016) reading of *Brick Lane* is particularly germane to this tension, as it demonstrates how feminist analysis can be an effective means for exposing unequal gendered orderings, but also be one that dangerously essentializes Bangladeshi culture. The two novels thus indicate that the notions of internal gender inequality and external structural inequality must be considered together, and not as alternatives.

In both novels, the politics of belonging also evolves through a process of self-reflection, as opposed to a binary decision between homeland and host society. The concept of diasporic space proposed by Brahm (1996) can help to understand this complexity as it is not always about geographical displacement but is also a space of social interaction where identities, histories and power relations converge. Nazneen's London identity does not come at the expense of Bangladesh being substituted by Britain. Even though she gains a higher level of economic and personal

independence (Ali 2004), her sari, religious memory, pleasure with Hasina, Bangladeshi friendships, her motherhood, and her community relationships are still important to her. Kimberly too doesn't give up her Chinese identity to gain a sense of belonging. Educational and professional growth provides her with more opportunity in the United States compared to her attachment to Ma, the use of Chinese, her family history and responsibilities within the immigrant home (Kwok, 2010). These pathways are nearer to negotiated belonging than assimilation.

This process can also be understood through Yuval-Davis' distinction between belonging and the politics of belonging (2006). Belonging requires emotional connections and attachments, and also social position; the politics of belonging is about the borders through which belonging is asserted, policed and forbidden. Both novels enact the two dimensions. Although emotionally attached to Bangladesh, Nazneen is having to deal with conflicting ideas of what a Bangladeshi woman should be in London. Even though Kim is aware of her mother's continuing hold on her, she knows what she should expect of her and what she should sacrifice for their betterment as a family. The problem is not that they do not belong to a culture, but that others try to turn belonging into rules that determine behaviour. Cultural authenticity is politicized when attachment turns into an obligation to behave in certain ways.

The novels are thus a representation of women's agency, not a rejection of cultural ties but as the ability to redefine them. This is especially apparent about Nazneen's development. Analysing *Brick Lane*, Yousef (2019) interprets the text through hybridity and Bhabha's third space, focusing particularly on the protagonist's transgression of the binary categories. The current analysis draws a similar conclusion but is more focused on authenticity as reading through gender: Nazneen's agency emerges in the ways she refuses to buy into the notion of what her cultural identity should demand from her as defined by Chanu and Karim. When she reaches the point of so-called self-determination, she is not any the less Bangladeshi; she can simply detach cultural affiliation from enforced subservientness. That's the same distinction applies to Kimberly, although she traces a different path. The more she learns and can speak Chinese and be self-supporting, the closer she is to her Ma and the more she is a Chinese American (Kwok, 2010). Her agency is in renegotiation of the conditions of family loyalty.



These differences also make it impossible to come up with a generalized model of diasporic womanhood from the comparison. Nazneen is an adult migrant whose first experience of life is mediated by marriage, domesticity, low English proficiency and motherhood while Kimberly is a child migrant whose identity is formed in the context of school, industrial work, language brokering, class mobility and mother-daughter families. Resistance forms and opportunities are therefore not interchangeable between their forms of dependence. This distinction helps in the discussion of the differentiated nature of diasporic places as proposed by Brah (1996) and the debunking of essentialism of both culture and gender put forward by Narayan (1998). It is a struggle over what meanings are given to these concepts of gender, culture, obligation and belonging that brings the protagonists together; not a shared essence.

The results indicate that cultural authenticity in *Brick Lane* and *Girl in Translation* is not static and is continually negotiated for interpretation. Cultures in both novels continually argue with themselves. Concepts of cultural loyalty are not the same for everyone: Chanu, Karim, Razia, Nazneen, Ma, Aunt Paula, and Kimberly. Some say continuity is necessary to maintain authority; some modify past traditions based on the new situations; others maintain emotional and cultural connections while rejecting the concept that all decisions must be based on emotional and cultural connections. The novels' exploration of multicultural belonging is bound up in this inner multiplicity. Both texts depict diasporic culture not as a dichotomy of tradition and modernity, East and West, or community and autonomy, but rather as a process of choice, assertion, struggle, and re-creation.

The comparative evidence thus suggests a relational perspective of cultural authenticity in relation to gender. The results generally resemble the studies on *Brick Lane* which have focused on the matter of gendered negotiation and migrant identity (Hasan, 2018; Poon, 2009; Prasasti, 2018; Rezaie, 2016; Yousef, 2019), and also the studies on *Girl in Translation* in relation to hybridity, class, immigrant labour, language, and female identity (Gasztold, 2021; Ningtyas & Rosyidah, 2014; Tuffahati & Suardi, 2025; Uysal & Kuleli, 2026). The present comparison extends these discussions by incorporating both cultural authenticity and the politics of belonging to be analyzed in the same frame. What is important in both novels is not just that women retain or transform their cultures, but who is entitled to deem some versions of change legitimate and to assess women's behavior as a telling example of it, and

what differences between women and men, whether tangible or intangible, determine the definitions of change itself.

## 6. CONCLUSION

*Brick Lane* and *Girl in Translation* demonstrate that the politics of belonging frequently makes its way into the lives of women through everyday decisions about what a good wife, daughter, mother, worker or immigrant should be. These judgements gain even more impact when they are characterized as culturally authentic. First Nazneen is considered a "unspoiled" village woman and then she is idealized by Karim as the "real thing. Kimberly internalizes the role of a good Chinese girl and refuses to accept a permanent debt from Aunt Paula and is accused of being rootless as a result. In both instances the use of authenticity is another language in which others try to stabilize lives already undergoing a process of change, that of the women. These novels do not respond to this pressure by lopping off cultural affiliation. Rather, the distinction between belonging and cultural purity is presented. Nazneen asserts that she has the right to determine for herself where and how to live while at the same time retaining her links with Bangladeshi memory, family, religion, friendship and dress. Kimberly is still very much part of Ma, still very much part of Chinese language, still very much part of responsibility towards the family, also still very much part of resistance to exploitation, to education and to professional life. But their trajectories reveal that diasporic belonging is not guaranteed by maintaining an unchanged cultural package. It results from an ongoing process of judgment as to which relationships and practices can continue beyond avoiding the attachment and subordination mistake. So, the comparative value of the novels is the fact that they resist two reductions: the romantic, that cultural continuity is a protective mode; and the assimilationist, that freedom is a mode that requires leaving culture behind. What is called 'cultural authenticity' is revealed as a political argument rather than a neutral description, and as a gendered one at that. After that claim is made contestable, belonging is no longer a test of purity but a range of capacities, to live across what are called histories, obligations, and social locations, with the possibility for the interpretation of one's own attachments.



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