

Identity, Material Culture and “Thing Theory” in Two British Migrant Novels

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Literary depictions of lived migrant experience in contemporary Britain offer the reader a unique perspective from which to view identity formation and the role of material culture in shaping conceptions of selfhood. This article considers the nature of these perspectives through close readings of novels by Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali. It is argued that the two novels, *The Black Album* and *Brick Lane*, represent diaspora identities in contemporary Britain as liminal and fragmented, as well as susceptible to influence from material culture. The frame of reference for this discussion is set within the perimeters of an investigation into depictions of hybrid diaspora identities and the various ways in which material culture and inanimate objects are linked to their emergence and development. The article draws on the scholarship of Stuart Hall with regard to cultural identity and on Bill Brown’s work in the area of “thing theory” as a lens through which to explore material culture and its role in identity formation. The discussion of hybridity, space and the marginal position of migrants in contemporary British society writes back to Homi K. Bhabha’s conception of the “third space” in his seminal work, *The Location of Culture*.

Stuart Hall has written extensively on the subject of cultural identity and literature in a postcolonial context. His work is particularly relevant to the topic discussed in this paper as Hall asks important questions about cultural identity:

...[W]hat does the diaspora experience do to our models of cultural identity? How are we to conceptualize or imagine identity, difference and belongingness, after diaspora? Since “cultural identity” carries so many overtones of essential unity, primordial oneness, indivisibility and sameness, how are we to “think” identities inscribed within relations of power and constructed across difference and disjuncture? (545)

Hall’s questions can be applied, in particular, to the depiction of cultural identity and the marginalized nature of migrant experience in Hanif Kureishi’s novel, *The Black Album*. In the novel, Kureishi asks how his protagonist’s experiences as a migrant in Britain affect his sense of personal and cultural identity. The novel’s protagonist, Shahid Hasan, the son of a Pakistani immigrant father and English mother, questions his identity and is torn between Western consumerist culture and Pakistani Islamic culture. Kureishi’s protagonist wishes to experience all that

London has to offer, while simultaneously remaining connected to his Pakistani identity and heritage. This proves problematic, for instance, when Shahid is compelled to choose between his “London self” and his “Muslim self.” His choice is limited and limiting because it is put to him that there is only one mode of being in each world, and each of these modes is extreme in its own way. He finds he must choose between a very rigid, non-representative fundamental version of Muslim manhood or a hedonistic but constrictive love affair with a non-Muslim western woman. This reading of *The Black Album* demonstrates how an attempt to live between two cultures can itself be marginalizing and can ultimately lead to a sense of disconnection and “unbelonging.” As Salman Rushdie has observed, “sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools” (15). Kureishi's is a nuanced depiction of marginality and hybridity that deals with internal manifestations of marginality that stem from an internalization of stereotypes, a dislocation from both cultures, a sense of belonging and unbelonging. The novel asks its reader to think about the marginalized position of the contemporary migrant in terms of Bhabha's conception of the “third space.” This is an “in-between” space that “carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (38). This also resonates with Stuart Hall's work, which draws on his experiences of childhood conflicts with cultural hybridity. Hall has spoken of how he felt “torn between this internal culture of my family and the friends and people that I knew outside whom I would never have dreamt of taking home” and how he felt he was “the absolute cultural hybrid,” “a mongrel culturally” (660-1).

These themes also echo in Hanif Kureishi's autobiographical accounts of the conflicts he faced growing up in London in the 1960s, a time when he encountered racism on a daily basis because of his Pakistani heritage. For Kureishi, being Pakistani was something to be ashamed of: “From the start I tried to deny my Pakistani self. I was ashamed. It was a curse and I wanted to be rid of it. I wanted to be like everyone else. I read with understanding a story in a newspaper about a black boy who, when he noticed that burnt skin turned white, jumped into a bath of boiling water” (9). Within such an individual, the imposition of a blanket sense of ethnicity or nationality can be marginalizing in itself and can lead to fragmentation at the very core of selfhood. Collective identity is also problematic for such individuals, as this tends to be homogenous and hence restrictive. Thus, Kureishi, through his second-generation protagonist, explores the need for the creation not solely of more than one type of “Englishness” but also of forms of “Pakistani-ness,” in order to allow for greater diversity and expression of cultural and individual identities. In a novel such as *The Black Album*, Kureishi provides a depiction of what an identity free of the constraints of marginality would look like in the figure of Shahid, a devout Muslim who attends the Mosque and is simultaneously passionate about popular music and sexual experimentation. Due to the narrowly defined Pakistani Muslim identity that is foisted upon him, Shahid experiences his own identity as

fundamentally wrong and is forced to choose between the two elements that constitute his essential self. Kureishi's stark message in *The Black Album* is that an insistence on rigidly defined conceptions of identity leads to a fracturing of individual identities.

Throughout Kureishi's narrative, the exploration of hybridity centres on the depiction of the multifaceted construction of identities amongst diaspora groups and the myriad ways in which this identity can be construed as problematic. Similarly, echoes of these kinds of conflicts with cultural identity resound in Monica Ali's novel, *Brick Lane*. The differences between first- and second-generation immigrants' experiences of cultural hybridity are illustrated effectively in *Brick Lane*, specifically through the depiction of the lives of the protagonist's children. The depiction of this theme demonstrates the extent to which migration can act as an alienating force between the generations. As Yasmin Hussain argues,

[I]n the diaspora...the displaced generation of parents finds itself navigating within a social context that differs entirely from that which they share with their own parents, except in so far as they can preserve or re-create islands of South Asia within the host country; or to put it another way, a means of isolating their children from the life that surrounds them from day to day. Their children, the British-born generation, are further removed from the conventions of the South Asian cultures, whilst not wholly assimilated into the surrounding indigenous culture. Conflicts arise between the British born generation and their immigrant parents, which are compounded by the layers of difference between the surrounding British majority culture and that of the British South Asian communities. Thus the creative works of diasporic writers address multiple levels of contradiction and conflict around issues of collective and individual identity. (9)

Such generational differences can certainly be identified in *Brick Lane*, although it is important to note Avtar Brah's opinion that "inter-generational difference should not be conflated with conflict" (42). In the novel, Shahana is the British-born adolescent daughter of the novel's first-generation immigrant protagonist Nazneen and her husband, Chanu. The disputes that arise between Chanu and his eldest daughter make for uncomfortable reading as the reader becomes increasingly aware of potentially irreconcilable differences between the manifestations of two vastly different cultures competing for space in Shahana's self-conception. Like Kureishi in his account of his adolescent self, Shahana just wants to be like everyone else, so she demands that her mother buys her shampoo and English convenience foods, bringing her into direct conflict with her father who strives in vain to foster in his daughter a love of Tagore and an appreciation of her cultural heritage. In her drawing of the character of Shahana, Ali portrays with sensitivity the concerns of a young British Asian woman in search of identity. The depiction, for example, of Shahana's sartorial shifts between jeans and shalwar kameez symbolizes the wider conflicts between her home and public lives. As Stuart Hall has noted, "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across

different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (4).

It is notable that throughout *The Black Album* and *Brick Lane*, each author reveals the world of the everyday life of the migrant by taking an inventory of the objects that fill its physical space and noting the significance attached to certain objects. Thus, it can be argued that both Monica Ali and Hanif Kureishi explore the topic of migrant experience and the formation of identity in terms of material culture. Objects and identity are closely associated here, leading to an opportunity to consider the relationship between people and things, between objects and the formation of self. As a critical lens through which to contemplate this relationship, “thing theory” offers many interesting perspectives. The scholarship of Bill Brown in this area is particularly pertinent to this discussion. Brown underscores the importance of questions relating to “thing theory” that probe the

ideological and ideational effects of the material world and of transformations of it. These questions ‘ask not whether things are but what work they perform—questions in fact, not about things themselves but about the subject-object relation in particular temporal and spatial contexts’. This is in order to demonstrate the power of objects, ‘to show how they organise our private and public affection’. (7)

This emphasis on the power of objects is certainly present in both of the novels considered in this paper and the section that follows offers an interpretation of this depiction.

In *The Black Album* there is a particular emphasis placed upon the myriad ways in which objects influence Shahid’s movements between cultures. One specific category of object that is underscored as powerful and influential is clothing. In *The Black Album*, books, newspapers and items of clothing are the objects imbued with a heightened significance. Throughout the novel, Kureishi suggests that objects can be read as potent symbols, highlighting, among other things, the disparities and contradictions between Eastern and Western culture. Kureishi deftly demonstrates the symbolic significance of clothing, the meaning we invest in our own clothes and the way people often judge one another based on their clothing. An example of Brown’s notion of the “potency” of objects can be found at the moment in the novel when Shahid first dons traditional Pakistani dress and finally wins the approval of his Islamic friend Chad (7). It is as though Shahid’s identity is instantly changed when he puts on the shalwar kameez: “He watched as Shahid changed, for the first time, into ‘national dress.’ Chad looked him over before taking, from behind his back, a white cap. He fitted it on Shahid’s head, stood off a moment, and embraced him. “Brother, you look magnificent”” (*Black Album* 131). After allowing himself to be dressed, almost ceremonially, in the traditional dress of shalwar kameez, Shahid makes a highly significant visit to a mosque, literally moving from a secular to a religious space. This is the first time in the narrative that the reader sees Shahid visiting the place of worship and it seems that the symbolic change of clothing brings about a

momentous shift in his identity. Earlier in the novel Shahid wears a leather jacket, an item of clothing that Dee Dee especially admires. Whilst wearing the leather jacket, Shahid went to pubs and raves, took drugs and drank alcohol, had sex with Dee Dee, and generally engaged in activities associated with western, secular culture. However, when he wears the shalwar kameez he engages in altogether different activities and begins to inhabit a very different state of mind: “He prayed as best he could, hearing in his head Hat’s exhortations and instructions; he asked God to grant him realization, understanding of himself and others, and tolerance. Feeling empty of passion and somewhat delivered and cleansed, he settled down with his notebook” (*Black Album* 131).

The power of objects in the novel is once again underlined through the influence of music and literature on Shahid. Throughout the novel it is repeatedly iterated that the only material possessions that Shahid cares about are his books and records. The title of the novel, *The Black Album*, intimates the significance of music in Shahid’s coming-of-age process (for the novel can essentially be categorised as a kind of second-generation immigrant’s *bildungsroman*). The title is a reference to the Prince album released in 1994. The album cover was entirely black and featured no text. The symbolism reflected Prince’s desire to reconnect with a black audience. Kureishi’s choice of title can thus be interpreted as an underscoring of the importance of music in the construction of identity and the empowering of marginalized minority groups. Paul Gilroy has written extensively about the significance of black music in this context, illuminating “the power which black music has as a transmitter, not merely of black culture but of oppositional and anti-authoritarian values” (176). Shahid’s admiration of Prince underscores the significance of black musicians as role models for the marginalized, the oppressed, and the other. Explaining his love of Prince to Deedee Osgood, Shahid struggles to define the essence of his appeal—“He’s half black and half white, half man, half woman, half size, feminine but macho too”—and it is the in-betweenness, the hybridity, the not quite one but not quite the otherness that is so appealing to Shahid, because it so truly reflects his own identity, his own position in British society (*Black Album* 25). In addition, the books are symbolic on a number of levels. They represent the potential for learning, gaining knowledge, and self-improvement. There is perhaps a suggestion that the migrant figure must immerse his or her self in books in the hope that education will open up new opportunities and eventually bring about equality and acceptance within the new society. The religious fundamentalist characters in Kureishi’s novel view Shahid’s collection of books, records and clothing as external signifiers of moral dissipation. To his Islamic fundamentalist friends, Shahid cannot be truly Pakistani until he rejects these objects that symbolize Western decadence. His collection of Prince records for instance, becomes almost an obsession with his Islamic extremist friend, Chad, who has himself renounced Western culture in favour of Islam. Chad cannot come to terms with the extent of

Shahid's attachment to his record collection and repeatedly attempts to convince his friend to surrender his music collection:

Gimme those Prince records!

Don't touch those, some are imports!

Shahid found himself struggling with Chad. (*Black Album* 80)

The records thus become a physical manifestation of the struggle Shahid faces as a migrant attempting to find his true identity in a world where Islam is pitted as an enemy of Western popular culture. In addition, the inanimate objects, these books and popular music records, come to define and influence the relationships Shahid forms with those around him. Books, for instance, and specifically one book, *The Satanic Verses*, become powerful objects in the narrative. The book becomes a physical manifestation of the in-between, unstable nature of Shahid's existence, and the fragmented nature of his identity. When his fundamentalist friends burn the book, Shahid's lover Dee Dee Osgood reports them to the police, and Shahid is forced to choose a side. The physical book, an inanimate object, is imbued with the potency to influence Shahid's future. This demonstrates the veracity of Brown's argument that "inanimate objects constitute human subjects," illustrating how they "move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects" (7). The book itself wields an extraordinary power over Shahid, stripping him of any sure sense of his own identity. After the book is burned, Shahid reflects on its significance: "He wanted to crawl back to his room, slam the door and sit down with a pen; that was how he would reclaim himself. This destruction of a book—a book which was a question—had embodied an attitude to life which he had to consider" (*Black Album* 227).

The power of objects to shape human behaviours and relationships in the context of lived migrant experience is a theme that is also explored by Monica Ali in *Brick Lane*. Once again, Brown's conception of "thing theory" is a useful tool for the analysis of this depiction. Specifically, it is possible to identify in Ali's rendering of Nazneen's interactions with the objects that surround her an example of Brown's notion of the "subject-object relation in particular temporal and spatial contexts" (7). In *Brick Lane*, inanimate household objects loom large upon Nazneen's consciousness to the point of oppressing her sense of physical freedom within the domestic space. At times of personal crisis for Nazneen throughout the novel, Ali describes the physical world, the landscape of inanimate objects, as harsh and threatening. London, the strange city of Nazneen's mind, is conveyed as a world crammed with sharp-edged objects and potential hazards: "The city shattered. Everything was in pieces. She knew it straight away, glimpsed it from the painful-white insides of the ambulance. Frantic neon signs. Headlights chasing the dark. An office block, cracked with light. These shards of the broken city" (*Brick Lane* 117). Here the image of a broken, fractured city provides the reader with a telling insight into how Nazneen cannot separate her

personal life from the world that is going on outside of her. Although she has little or no contact with the outside world, with London, nonetheless in times of anguish, pain, or crisis, Nazneen describes how the physical city manifests her own private emotions through its shapes and structures.

In this section of the novel, a time of great pain for Nazneen, when her infant son is being rushed to hospital in an ambulance, Ali takes great pains to have Nazneen engage with her physical surroundings at the time when she would be least expected to notice the physical world around her. As she races through the London streets in the ambulance Nazneen takes time to note that the houses she sees resemble “red-brick tombs” (*Brick Lane* 117). At the moment of deepest catastrophe and tragedy in the novel, the point at which she learns of the death of her son, Nazneen fixates on the inanimate objects that happen to be lying around in the hospital room where her son had slept. She “regarded the plastic cups by the sink, the towels and clothes playing havoc on the pull-down bed where she and Chanu took turns sleeping” (*Brick Lane* 144). In this way it becomes clear that the physical world of objects becomes almost like a language, the words of which Nazneen picks up one by one, stringing them together until such time they comprise a coherent whole, a sentence with which she can make sense of the new realities of her life. Or, alternatively, these objects can be viewed as akin to places on a map with familiar names; Nazneen must learn to know the places in between, the strange, unfamiliar places, and to do this she must negotiate her way between the familiar ones, landmarks along the way, until she has made her way safely through the unknown spaces.

In the following section Ali describes the ways in which Nazneen came to know her new environment when she first arrived in England as an immigrant from Bangladesh:

When she had come [to England] she had learned first about loneliness, then about privacy, and finally she learned a new kind of community. The wife upstairs who used the lavatory in the night....The milkman’s alarm clock that told Nazneen the grueling hours her neighbour must keep. The woman on the other side whose bed thumped the wall when her boyfriends called. These were her unknown intimates. (*Brick Lane* 182)

In this passage three disparate objects are singled out for attention: a lavatory, an alarm clock, and a bed. These are the unremarkable, everyday objects that perform such an important role in helping Nazneen, a symbol of wider migrant experience, assimilate into and make sense of her new environment. There are so many barriers to communication and understanding for a recent migrant to a new country, such as Nazneen, and Ali suggests that the migrant must come up with new and unusual means of understanding and adapting. Nazneen appears to symbolically grope around in the dark, feeling her way through the darkness with only objects such as the ones mentioned as her guide.

In her critical response to *Brick Lane*, Sara Upstone has written about Monica Ali’s characterization of Nazneen as “the archetypal migrant

figure,' seeing her as an embodiment of "a diasporic identity in which the place of settlement and the place called home are separated from each other, where one is always looking elsewhere: to both another place and another time" (2008). This assessment of the role of Nazneen as a symbol of the wider migrant experience is a key idea and one which deserves further exploration. Ali's depiction of Nazneen's sense of being trapped within the physical confines of a repressive domestic space and oppressed by the objects that surround her can perhaps be seen as symbolic of the experience of many other migrants, particularly female Muslims. I will take this idea as a starting point for the following section. One of the most conspicuous objects of symbolic significance in the novel is the sewing machine. In this section I would like to explore in more depth the symbolic possibilities and significance of the sewing machine.

The sewing machine is of paramount importance to the development of the character of Nazneen in *Brick Lane*. Furthermore, it can be argued that it is employed by Ali as a symbol of hope, empowerment, independence, and creativity. The sewing machine is one of the only things in the domestic space of which Nazneen is truly mistress. She is adept at its use, while her husband can only sit by her side and play the role of assistant: "He made himself available at her elbow, handing thread, passing scissors, dispensing advice, making tea, folding garments," while Nazneen "mastered basting stitch, hemming, button-holing and gathering....Nazneen put in zips, flew through seams....Every spare piece of cloth in the house had been stitched together and taken apart and married to another....Spools of coloured thread sat on Chanu's books, bright flags signalling the way to knowledge" (*Brick Lane*, 194-5). The beautiful image of coloured thread resting on books is also quite obviously a symbol of Nazneen's blossoming talent, the juxtaposition of Nazneen's thread with Chanu's books representing the fact that Nazneen has found her own medium for self-improvement.

Through her act of complete colonisation of the sewing machine Nazneen creates a true identity for herself. The sewing machine is used to make clothes for a local factory, providing Nazneen with an income and the opportunity to move outside the restrictive domestic space. Therefore the sewing machine represents creativity in a more practical sense, that is, it represents the act of creation as a means of supporting oneself. By making items to sell Nazneen becomes the agent of her own destiny and the act of creation itself becomes a profound act of feminine independence, an act that echoes the achievement of Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* when she carved out a business and a new life for herself through the mastery of a sewing machine. Using their respective machines both women manage to create new economic and social realities for themselves. They can literally be seen to sew together the pieces of their own futures, independent of patriarchal oppression. Thus, the sewing machine in *Brick Lane* symbolizes the potential for change and improvement in the circumstances of the migrant figure in Britain. Michael Perfect argues that the "major concern of the novel is not

the destabilization of stereotypes but the celebration of the potential for adaptation in both individuals and societies” (43). In *Brick Lane*, Ali demonstrates how inanimate objects can act as media through which this adaptation can occur. Nazneen allows the sewing machine to take her in a new direction; she sees it as a life-giving force, rather than an inanimate object. Her approach to the sewing machine echoes Arjun Appadurai’s philosophy of “the social life of things,” acknowledging that through use and activity, things can reveal their life force: “...we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven them”(5). However, it is not always possible for adaptation to take place, and the objects alone cannot transform a situation, as evidenced by Chanu’s interactions with the computer. The purchase of the computer seems like a positive step forward for Chanu, but he lacks the knowledge that would help him to utilize the machine to its fullest potential. In the end, the most constructive thing he can think of doing with the computer is to use it to look at photos of his home in Bangladesh. Through this symbolic act we can see that Chanu is using the technology to move backwards instead of forwards. There is a profound contrast in outlook between husband and wife at this juncture of the novel. The sewing machine and the computer are purchased concurrently, but their respective symbolic potentials are interpreted in very different ways by their owners.

The second object that holds the power to arrest Nazneen’s thoughts is the Qur’an. The Qur’an is the sole inanimate object in the entire flat towards which Nazneen displays any attachment. If the wardrobe can be viewed as the embodiment of all of Nazneen’s fears and anxieties, then the Qur’an can be seen as its diametric opponent. Indeed, Nazneen is so attached to the Qur’an that she entreats her husband to construct a special shelf for its accommodation: “Standing on the sofa to reach, she picked up the Holy Qur’an from the high shelf that Chanu, under duress, had specially built” (*Brick Lane* 20). The shelf is elevated, so much so that Nazneen cannot reach it, emphasizing the symbolic significance of the book in Nazneen’s mind. She sees it as being the one object in the flat that is removed from and separate to the daily degradations and oppressions she suffers in her domestic prison. At times of stress throughout the novel she takes the Qur’an down from its shelf to read the words aloud because “the words calmed her stomach” (*Brick Lane* 20). The Qur’an fulfils the role of comforter at times of disquiet and distress. Furthermore, the book represents Islam for Nazneen, and its physical presence in such an alien domestic space brings her peace of mind and restores her sense of self. As Jane Hiddleston observes: “Islam is a form or signifier, connoting identity and certainty” (66). As if to confirm this idea, Ali writes: “She did not know what the words meant but the rhythm of them soothed her. Her breath came from down in her stomach. In and out. Smooth. Silent” (*Brick Lane* 21). The fact that Nazneen does not understand the words she recites serves to confirm the theory that it is the fact of Islam, and the fact of the

presence of the Holy Book in the flat, that is important, as together they serve to reassure Nazneen as to her true identity.

Later in the novel there is a further insight into the significance of the Qur'an to be gleaned. Nazneen observes of her husband Chanu, a voracious reader, that "of all the books that he held in his hand she had never once seen him with the Holy Qur'an" (*Brick Lane* 41). This observation is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, the language used is illuminating. Chanu is described as holding books in his hands, rather than reading them, thus emphasizing the transitory nature of his relationship with them. He cannot possess or control them in the same way that he can Nazneen. Once again, Nazneen is likened to an inanimate object. There is a recognition of similarities between Nazneen and the books. Nazneen can relate to the books because she too has been handled, passed from one hand to another, for most of her life. Secondly, this observation alerts the reader to a growing awareness on Nazneen's part of the possibility of constructing her own identity, separate to that of her husband. The Qur'an, untouched by Chanu's hands, becomes something truly sacred to Nazneen, something that is free of the taint of patriarchy associated with every other object in the flat.

The significance of an object such as the Qur'an certainly serves to demonstrate the power of objects and proves the veracity of Brown's assertion that certain objects "organise our private and public affection" (7). This emphasis on the power of objects is found in other places throughout the novel. For instance, it is possible to identify numerous passages containing descriptions of objects that litter the domestic space. It is interesting to note both the language Ali uses to describe the objects and how she describes Nazneen's interactions with them. The following passage is illuminating in this sense: "She walked around the room picking up any object, without knowing what it was or where she put it. When the floor was clear she began rearranging the things she had moved, grouping them promiscuously, deranging as she arranged" (*Brick Lane* 331). This passage comes at an important moment in the novel, the point at which Nazneen re-enters her own life after a breakdown. It marks a turning point in her development and the changes that are about to occur are symbolized by her moving around of the objects that monopolize her personal space. The objects themselves are described as insignificant ("any object"); it is her physical interaction with them that is significant. She picks them up, she takes charge of them, she moves them around; she is testing her power and agency here, practising her new found independence by asserting her dominance over these inanimate objects and in the process reclaiming her physical space.

Of all the inanimate objects that fill the domestic space in *Brick Lane*, one item in particular underscores the veracity of Brown's notion of the potency of the object to affect the subject. The symbolic significance of the wardrobe in *Brick Lane* should not be overlooked and deserves closer examination, not least because Gaston Bachelard has devoted a section to its contemplation in his seminal work, *The Poetics of Space* (78-81).

“Wardrobes,” writes Bachelard, “are veritable organs of the secret psychological life....They are hybrid objects, subject objects. Like us, through us and for us, they have a quality of intimacy” (78). As a representation of the “secret psychological life” of Nazneen, the wardrobe embodies her sense of living a cloistered, dislocated and marginalized life. At one juncture of the novel Ali describes the physical power that the wardrobe exerts over her protagonist, when she writes that Nazneen often tried to take refuge from her unhappy domestic situation in the bedroom. Ali describes how Nazneen would sit “in the bedroom until the wardrobe drove her out,” thus showing the reader that the wardrobe confronts Nazneen with her inner psychological turmoil. The wardrobe is a symbolic embodiment of Nazneen’s inner life, containing all of her subsumed dreams and ambitions. Its physical presence in the bedroom means that she can find no refuge, there is nowhere to hide from the truth of her miserable emotional condition. The forces of oppression that haunt Nazneen and make her a prisoner in her own home are all contained within the bedroom and the wardrobe asks Nazneen to confront the reality of her misery (*Brick Lane* 184). To open the wardrobe, then, is a painful experience, but one that Nazneen needs to realise if she is to move forward. As Bachelard remarks: “the real wardrobe is not an everyday piece of furniture. It is not opened every day, and so, like a heart that confides in no one, the key is not on the door” (79). Thus, the wardrobe can be seen to symbolize the inner emotional life of Nazneen and the sequestered nature of that inner life. The wardrobe, on several occasions throughout the novel, assumes anthropomorphic qualities. It becomes as much of a bully and a tyrant as Nazneen’s husband, and at times its presence seems to trouble her as much as that of her husband’s. In addition, it is telling that the wardrobe is the place used to store Nazneen’s husband Chanu’s certificates from myriad courses and training programmes that ultimately did nothing to advance his career or facilitate his successful integration into British society. The certificates “were waiting in the bottom of the wardrobe until someone had the energy to hang them” (*Brick Lane* 185). The wardrobe is therefore not only a symbol of Nazneen’s marginalized position, but also a repository for Chanu’s own dreams and a burial site for the ambition and hope he brought with him as a migrant to England.

Conclusion

Depictions of hybrid diaspora identities in contemporary literature offer the reader a unique insight into the lived experience of the British migrant in a postcolonial context. The two novels of migrant experience surveyed in this essay offer salient and overlapping insights into identity formation in the diaspora. Furthermore, these narratives delineate the myriad ways in which inanimate objects as symbols of material culture are linked to the

emergence and development of identity within diaspora groups in contemporary Britain. It has been argued that objects can therefore be seen to hold the potential to grant freedom and independence to the marginalized or oppressed migrant figure in literature. Each novel effectively demonstrates the symbolic potential of objects to tell the story of contemporary migrant experience. This potential is observed in both *The Black Album* and *Brick Lane* and demonstrates the veracity of Gilroy's assertion that items of material culture offer the marginalized migrant figure a means of expressing values and ultimately changing for the better their position within society (176).

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