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A Study of Cross Cultural and Self Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian-born American novelist, short story writer, non-fiction writer and journalist. Presently she is working as a Professor in the Department of English in the University of California. Totally, she has written eight novels. She has received National Book Critics Circle Award for *Middleman and Other Stories* in 1988. Bharati Mukherjee has married a Canadian writer, Clark Blaise on September 19, 1963 who was a student of Harvard University. After getting married to Clark Blaise, she got an opportunity to teach all over the United States and Canada. Her works mainly focuses on the phenomenon of migration and self-identity. Her novels depict

how contemporary women struggle for their identity and accomplish self-hood in alien countries. She focuses on cross cultural conflict and self-identity. The paper discusses the protagonist Dimple Dasgupta's problems psychologically and socially. In her writings, Bharati Mukherjee reflects on the basic idea, self-empowerment, which is essential for any human being and one can equipoise between the characteristics and the blending, can produce character like Jasmine and the imbalance in personality leads to someone like Dimple.

Keywords

Cross Cultural Identity; Self Identity; Bharati Mukherjee; *Wife*.

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Bharati Mukherjee's second novel, *Wife* is about Dimple, who leads a protected life throughout and as expected from a girl of Hindu traditional family, she is shy, docile and submissive. Her father was in search of a perfect match for her with appropriate caste, religion, etc., Dimple had set her mind to marry a neurosurgeon, but being an electrical engineer Dasgupta wants an engineer to marry her daughter. Dimple's thoughts differed – she wanted to live in a luxurious apartment at Chowringhee and to own a lot of fancy nylon saris. She was in dreams, fantasizing about young men with build-up muscles, mustaches, and spotless white dress. She thought that this marriage would bring her freedom, love, affection and a desirable life.

Dimple thought life has so far been simply a rehearsal for the real life, the kind of real life that comes with marriage which brings opportunities that single women are denied in Indian culture and Dimple was expecting those freedom more than anything else. Dimple often felt worried about her physical appearance (looking ugly and not so bosomy enough for marriage). She thought that breasts are having their own destiny, which ruins marriage. Mr. Dasgupta flattered and pleaded, smiling at Dimple and saying, "She is so sweet and docile, I tell you. She will never give a moment's headache" (14). Mrs. Dasgupta

often consoles her not to worry about the size of her breasts. “Worrying makes them shrink” (4). Dimple started reading women’s magazine ads and buying skin whiteners without hope and also became an isometric exerciser to improve her physic. Then she got few changes in her structure. Mrs. Dasgupta said that she should be happy with what God had given her. Mrs. Dasgupta was not happy with those exercises, so she insisted Dimple to have a massage using mustard oil, ground almond and honey pack before her bath. Even though Dimple followed Mrs. Dasgupta’s words, there is no reported change in her body. Suddenly on first week of July Dimple got hospitalized for five days due to fever and severe pain in her chest. She was discharged after her fever and pain subdued. Mrs. Dasgupta felt that her illness is nature’s way of indicating that a young woman is ready for marriage.

In mid-January, Mr. Dasgupta announced that he found a boy for his daughter. Amit Basu, a consultant engineer was his choice. Dimple got married to Amit Basu as per father’s wish. Dimple got disappointed as her marriage did not fulfill her dreams. Amit always wanted Dimple to act upon his words and please him. Dimple got her first disappointment when her mother-in-law changed her name into Nandhini. Her estranged situation made her to admire and consider Milt better than Amit.

Dimple got further isolated when they immigrate to America. Dimple got embarrassed, exiled and entered into a newer world. Staying at home, she got further isolated and became much depressed. She then started watching television and begins to detach herself and became confused with real life and imaginary life. She inactively concentrates on her house hold works and reacts passively to others. Dimple, who was in the state of confusion between reality and dream mistakenly had a sexual affair with Milt Glasser, an American.

Before they emigrate from Calcutta to America, Dimple had found herself to be pregnant. She did not desire to become a mother, so she tried to commit suicide until she aborts her fetus. She aborts her baby by skipping a rope. She

exclaimed that it was not murder that she could not commit murder. She regularly imagined about her own suicide, and accumulated a list of various suicide methods to be successful. She thought that her death would form some sort of identity. But once, when Amit slinked to embrace her, she slashed him with the knife and responded intuitively with irrepressible fear which she had from her environment.

Bharati Mukherjee's writings intensely portray the life of immigrant Indian women like her, who struggle to negotiate the traps and opportunities of alien country. Mukherjee can be categorized as diasporic writer of three different countries like India, the U.S and Canada. *Wife* is divided into three parts based on changing phases of Dimple's life. The first part of novel traces Dimple getting married to Amit Basu and learning to live in joint family with her mother-in-law Mrs. Basu. The second part of the novel marks Dimple's migration to the U.S. with her husband. They live with the another joint family in the flat of Amit's friend, Jyothi Sen. In fact Dimple and Amit never live independent from their friends. They always rely on their friends for help and hospitality. The third part of the novel describes about their migration to a sophisticated part of New York. They live in an apartment which belong to Jyothi's Friends Prodosh and Marsha who were on vacation. They are free from joint family life for a while in this apartment. Significantly, Dimple's difficulty in adapting to the Martian West apparently reflects Mukherjee's own experience of discrimination in Canada. Even though Dimple tries to adapt herself to American life style in certain circumstances, she has the strong urge to retain her own Indian identity. The past has become an important element in her subjectivity because her efforts to retain her own Indian identity shows that she does not wish to give away her past, a part of her original identity. "Dimple is a taker not a giver".

Wife ends with the culmination of Dimple committing a murder. She kills Amit by piercing at the mole on his face. She was fully confused with her

realities and unaware of her own actions. Again it is depicted like a dream. She emblematically got freedom from Amit. She believes women in television get away with such kind of violent act. Her identity might be described with slender serration for which she is named and in vengeance she has sought Amit's much more identifiable facial features as the target of her frustrations. The decision to kill is in a seething state of mind which is very important. It is not intentional. The self-consciousness is a complicated part of Dimple's personality which proves to be self-malicious. The forced self-abnegation is not sustained for a very long time.

Dimple in *Wife* is symbolized as a voice without enunciation and without a dream. Such characters are visionless because they are voiceless. They are rootless because they are shooting less. She has adjusted and compromised herself with fate but the news of their migrating to the U.S. gives a spark of desire and hope to her glowering life. She again begins to have hopes of freedom from the other country like America which delineates a new concept of freedom which is fascinating to her senses. Amit wants her to interact with people but is really frightened about her becoming American. She destined with her world of fantasies hiding her thirst from her husband. There is communication barrier between husband and wife (or) communication is collapsed between Amit and Dimple which shows her sensibility. She has dreams filled with violence, fear, and death. She was paying attention to Milt Glasser 'the interesting other', who complies her good and happy life. But she does not have the chance to find any grip of her because her filaments are in her husband's hands. Conspicuously the husband becomes a competitor when he is not the man of her dreams.

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