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Psychological Trauma of the Protagonist in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the concealed and suppressive mental depression faced by Dimple, the protagonist of one of Mukherjee's famous novels entitled *Wife*. It is quite common in typical Indian families where the men have total control over women in terms of their feelings, thoughts, desires and even whims. A wife must act obediently like a servant to all the commands of her husband, the breadwinner of the family. A destructive consequence of this issue is the hidden attachment of trauma in the mind of the sufferer just as it happens in the case of Dimple. Mukherjee stunningly blends in the build-up of agony of the protagonist with a typical Indianised subservient background as it happens to Indian women worldwide.

Keywords

Psychological Trauma; Suppression; Migration; Bharathi Mukherjee; *Wife*; Patriarchy.

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Bharati Mukherjee, who was born in 1940, is an Indian-born American contemporary novelist, critic and short-story writer. She comes from a wealthy Bengali Brahmin family and was brought up in Ballygunje, Calcutta during her early childhood days. Even at an early age, she started to perceive the poverty of the beggars, political issues and religious riots engulfing her nation. At the age of eight, she travelled to Europe and later returned to her homeland in the 1950s. She gained a bachelor's degree and double master's degree specializing in the field of arts. Most of the novels written by Mukherjee depict the connection between the Indian and American world. Some of her best works are *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Jasmine*, *Wife*, *Desirable Daughters*, *Leave it to me* and *The Middleman and Other Stories*. She won the National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Middleman and Other Stories* in 1988. Even though Mukherjee's roots are embedded in the Indian soil, she claimed herself as an American writer. She declared that India was her home but her true emotions lie in North America. Mukherjee has been recognized for developing her own style and message that has relevance in American literature. As Gary Boire states, "Mukherjee's is a revisionary, appropriative technique, one that 'channels' deeply ... into an existent literary landscape in order to excavate her own highly deserved space".

Wife was published in 1975. It is a story of a protagonist named Dimple, who is torn between Indian and American culture. The main problem found in this novel can be categorized as a national phenomenon in India imposed upon the womenfolk. Dimple presents an example of the strong hold in the psychological trauma faced by Indian women still today. Her longing for freedom, fantasies of unfulfilled romance, silent self-tortures, depressed and

vexed mind and accumulation of frustration is well within the context of the situation of Indian women. This is happening in India still today but it is hidden to our sight. The depressed state of Dimple is not sensed by the outer world as she brilliantly concealed the fact from others. On the whole, the trauma as well as the mentality of the victim is veiled from the society.

It starts off with a misconception of Dimple fantasizing and dreaming of marriage as a path leading towards freedom. Being wedded seemed to her as a form of liberation from captivity. This is a wrong notion. She also wished to marry a neurosurgeon but her family preferred and had chosen an engineer named Amit for her. “Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father was looking for engineers in the matrimonial ads” (*Wife*).

This in fact was a form of hidden stress in Dimple as her family was making all the decisions in spite of her wishes. This is the starting point of accumulated trauma. The marriage ceremony was a symbol of perfection as it went well as planned. This is an irony to the post married life of Dimple. She discovered that her husband was unlike the man of her dreams or prince charming possessing qualities like romance, loving, tender at heart and adorable. On the contrary, he was a person with male-chauvinist values. She must obey his orders and never cross the line that he had drawn for her. He never cared to fulfill her wishes and thought her as a command following robot. This is one of the concealed miseries of Dimple.

Her loss of identity can be seen when her mother-in-law refused to accept her name and called her “Nandini” as she found “Dimple” to be inappropriate. This identity crisis further developed a muted trauma in Dimple. She loved her name as it is. Her real name was not given any respect as it is the signature of her true self.

As the novel moves on, one can see that Dimple was unhappy with her pregnancy. This is an awkward situation where bearing the first child in the

womb is a precious moment for every women on earth. Dimple saw it as an obstruction of her freedom and especially during the time of her leaving for America with her husband. This in itself is a mental torture. What she did to abort the fetus was another incident which can even haunt everyone's mind. Dimple went to the extreme of using a skipping rope and jumped on the slippery bathroom floor which led to her disastrous fall and abortion. She was not scared and was not bothered to think of the damages it can cause to her body due to this intended accident. All she thought was aborting the child which might act as an obstruction for her travel. This behavior of Dimple further portrays her traumatic condition. As people around her pitied and vexed for the loss of the baby, she in spite of the pain and affliction felt the pride of succeeding in her mission. The hidden build-up of trauma within the confines of her mind can be clearly seen.

Her migration to America was another symbol of isolation and loneliness. A new country and a new set-up with her hard-hearted husband was a cruel experience for Dimple. Although she was a literate and educated person from Calcutta, the culture of the ethnic minorities in America kindled an unsaid fear in her. The shock of her sudden exposure in a foreign land is portrayed in the lines below:

Huge black men in leather jackets and small dark men shouting to her in English she didn't understand or in Spanish; Puerto Rican girls in tight sweaters and pants who looked almost like Indians except that they could mug and stab and kill. (*Wife*)

In the process she landed in the boat of friendship with several people like Meena Sen, Ina Mullick and Milt Glasser. Once again she started dreaming and wished to get a good job, and socialize feely with people and enjoy the life that the States can offer. However, all her wishes were denied by Amit. She became detached to the outer world. Her state was a confused one torn between her desires and prohibition of her husband. Her life changed into a

caged bird despite her dreams of escaping from one in the name of marriage. She felt better in the absence of Amit and suffocated when he was around as can be seen in the lines below: He was angry all the time. She was glad he was out so much; it was easier to think of him, even get sentimental over him, when he was not in the room (*Wife*).

She saw a standard and perfect mother as well as housewife in Meena Sen. On the other hand an imbalanced, outgoing, lively, and carefree creature in Ina Mullick. But she was none of these two. This is once again a kind of identity crisis where she was not able to identify herself. Dimple was absent from herself. Her inability to act as a perfect Bengali wife led her to indifference towards life. She slept nearly the whole day, cooked only when necessary and watched lots of TV programs. Dimple turned into a walking and breathing corpse. Dimple's helplessness to express herself and her hesitating pathetic condition can be seen in the lines below.

Ina Mullick leaned against the cold radiator and stared at Dimple ... When Meena left the room to boil water for rice, Ina said, "What do you do all day?" which made Dimple blush. "Lots of things," Dimple said softly. "I read a lot." "Don't you ever go out?" "I don't have to." (*Wife*)

From the beginning of the novel, Dimple gained pleasure in vomiting. This is a result of psychological trauma. The yellow liquid coming from the pit of the stomach gave her a kind of fascination. Dimple was unable to accept and swallow the wretched condition of her soul and this was symbolized by her desire towards vomiting. She searched happiness through disgusting and inappropriate actions like this. At times, she imagined numerous horrifying ways in committing suicide. All these caused her mind to wander off from reality into a world of terror. Extreme distress and agonized mind of Dimple is beautifully shown by Mukherjee.

Dimple found the charm, compassion, tenderness and appealing nature in Milt Glasser which she had expected from Amit in vain. In her eyes, he was an embodiment of happiness. In her heart, she knew that Glasser told lots of lies but his casual behavior and easy-going personality appealed to her senses. His little gestures and touches stimulated the buried emotions in Dimple. This feeling led to the brief sexual affair between them. Even though this seemed immoral, this act of Dimple was out of her discontented soul physically living with Amit but emotionally and mentally absent from him. She lost her trust and hated Amit secretly. She did not trust him anymore, did not trust his high-pitched *yes* and *no* which had once seemed oracular... (*Wife*).

Her illusions and puzzlement between dream and reality is a signal of Dimple's mind losing track of itself. She visualized whatever she saw on the TV and was confused of the difference between the two worlds. The hidden misery was the cause behind this. Her mind was completely suppressed as she lived within the four walls of her house and was banned to leave her safe zone by her husband. This smothering attitude of her husband made her to be absent from the actual world. Too much of movies and TV shows and her confinement within her house made her mind hysterical in silence. As a consequence, she was losing the equilibrium of her mind and started to imagine unreal things from movies.

The suffering in silence and the pile up of despair turned Dimple into a murderer in the end. She stabbed Amit on the mole near his neck continuously and killed him in a dreadful manner. The concealed trauma transformed Dimple into a monstrous creature. She considered this as a real freedom. Finally, the cage was opened for the bird to escape. There was not a tint of guilt in Dimple's mind due to murdering her husband. The novel concludes with her confused state of whether the murder itself was a part of her dream or reality. Dimple believed that she could escape from law and punishment just like the characters she saw on TV.

Critics have considered Dimple as a prey to psychological uncertainty and trauma in relation with violent exposure to American culture. Her alteration in cultural perspectives and buried mental wounds led her to become an assassin as mentioned by C.L Chua:

...a weak-minded Bengali woman who migrates to New York with her engineer husband in search of a better life; but her sensibilities become so confounded by her changing cultural roles, the insidious television factitiousness, and the tensions of feminism that, ironically, she goes mad and kills her husband. (*Wife*)

The extreme fear trapped in Dimple had transformed into an impulsive bold act in the end. The prolonged confidential agony and dilemma turned her mind into a vengeful weapon when the opportunity to strike came.

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