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## **An Analytical Study of the Women's Psyche in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife***

**Dr. R. Suriya Prakash Narayanan**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Alagappa University College of Arts and Science, Paramakudi, Tamil Nadu, India.

### **Abstract**

Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* deals with the immigrant experience of the Indians and their disillusionment that follows it. It takes up the theme of marriage. The novel is divided into three parts where each part tells the story of a middle class Bengali girl who marries and later migrates to New York. *Wife* is an analytical study of the women's psyche. It reflects the pain of exclusion and portrays the "splintered-self" of the protagonist. It studies the female protagonist's dilemma of rootlessness and her incapacity to belong. The novelist deals with the identity crisis and depicts the mental trauma through which the protagonist Dimple Basu passes. Though the novel focuses on immigrant experience, it also concentrates much on the problem faced by the protagonist Dimple, after her marriage with her husband Amit. The novel focuses on Dimple's peculiar reactions to the typical situations of married life. Since beginning she suffers from inferiority complex. She remains worried of

her. She thinks of marriage as a source of self-realization and liberation. Marriage, she thinks, would free her and provide her real life.

### **Keywords**

Identity Crisis; Mental Trauma; Immigrant Experience.

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The emergence of women writers during 1870s is of great significance as it marks the birth of an era which promises a new deal for the Indian women. The zealous social reform effected by William Bentinck and Raja Rammohan Roy had brought the Indian women emancipation from the tyranny of the ages and from cruel customs like sati. The advent of English education with facility for higher education for women had again its impact on the status of women in society. The Indian women for ages had to be content with playing only a subordinate role in the social life of the country. But now they have opportunities for playing many new roles.

Enlightened families like the Toru Dutt family educated their girls at home and at school and even sent them to universities. But the lot of the average Indian women still remained much the same, for custom and superstition died hard and few were the parents who could be bold enough to break the old barriers and break the shackles of tradition. Evils associated with child marriage, child widowhood and too much of control and subordination still persisted and education which alone could bring them some relief from dependency and subservience was still out of the reach for most women. In other words, the battle for emancipation was not over and this battle was taken over by a few educated women themselves. They communicated to the world their own bitter experiences as women as well as their ideas of social reform in their writings.

The women novelists who appeared in the Indo-English literary scene during the first quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> century following the publication of *Govinda*

*Samanta* were writers of great promise. The very emergence of women writing in English during this period was very significant in itself. The birth of a new era held out for the Indian woman opportunities for a dynamic participation in the social life of the country.

Bharati Mukherjee, an expatriate of the Indian origin in the United States of America, is one of the remarkable women writers who have contributed an explicit fiction to the much debated vein of post modernist literature. The writer of a posterior vision and dehumanizing trend of negative capability, she like Meena Alexander and several of other woman novelists, has made the case of an traditional experience dominating issue over a detached kind of living in the future. She has received considerable critical attention from almost all the quarters of the globe. Bharati Mukherjee's academic and professional career won him many a laurels. Twice she availed herself of Grants from McGill University in 1968 and 1970. Besides winning Canada Arts Council Grant twice in the years 1973-74 and 1977, she was also awarded the prestigious Shastri-Indo-Canadian Institute Grant during the year 1976-77. She was a recipient of Guggenheim Foundation Award in 1978-79 and Canadian Government Award in 1982. She also won the first prize from Periodical Distribution Association in 1980 for her short story "Isolated Incidents". Mukherjee has also been honoured with the National Book Critics Circle Award, for her short story collection, *The Middleman and Other Stories* in 1989. Her creative oeuvre comprises five novels – *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of The World* (1993) and *Leave it To Me* (1997) and two collections of short stories – *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988).

Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* deals with the immigrant experience of the Indians and their disillusionment that follows it. It takes up the theme of marriage. The novel is divided into three parts where each part tells the story of a middle class Bengali girl who marries and later migrates to New York.

*Wife* is an analytical study of the women's psyche. It reflects the pain of exclusion and portrays the "splintered-self" of the protagonist. It studies the female protagonist's dilemma of rootlessness and her incapacity to belong. The novelist deals with the identity crisis and depicts the mental trauma through which the protagonist Dimple Basu passes. Though the novel focuses on immigrant experience, it also concentrates much on the problem faced by the protagonist Dimple, after her marriage with her husband Amit. The novel focuses on Dimple's peculiar reactions to the typical situations of married life. Since beginning she suffers from inferiority complex. She remains worried of her. She thinks of marriage as a source of self-realization and liberation. Marriage, she thinks, would free her and provide her real life. "Being free and expressing yourself" (*Wife* 20).

The opening line – "Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon" (3) sets the scene that anticipates something unnatural. For Dimple Dasgupta neuro-surgeon is a very strange choice. Bharati Mukherjee has endowed Dimple's character with some symbolic dimensions. Her choice of the name of the heroine as Dimple is a deliberate one and her intentions are quite explicit from the cover page of the novel where she quotes *The Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "Dimple" as – "any slight surface depression" (43). The word "depression", present in the meaning of her name never allows Dimple to get rid of the various stages of frustration.

Dimple is an immature girl and lives in a romantic world. She dreams of marrying her would be husband, a neurosurgeon, to have a different kind of life-an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon sarees" (3). From the very beginning the readers can feel that Dimple is far from normal girls. Dimple has nothing to do except thinking about marriage because she thinks that marriage is blessing in disguise. It will bring her freedom, fortune and perfect happiness. She dreams of marriage as she hopes that it would bring freedom and love. At the same time, she is not

clear about the concepts of freedom and love. This ambiguity underlying her mental make-up defines the incompleteness of her very being. “Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love” (3).

Dimple strongly believes that premarital life is like “a dress rehearsal for actual living. Years of waiting had already made her nervous, unnaturally prone to colds, coughs and headaches” (3). Dimple is twenty but she greatly regrets for wasted years. Nothing pleases her more than the imagination about marrying a fellow who provides her all comforts. She is supposed to be studying for university examinations but books irritate her. Since beginning she suffers from inferiority complex. She remains worried of her “sitar shaped body and rudimentary breast (4) and thinks that her engineer husband would be “disappointed that she wasn’t bosomy and fair like a Bombay starlet” (4). While living in her world of fantasy, a woman who sets fire to herself becomes an object of envy to her since she thinks: “such pain, such loyalty, seemed reserved for married women” (6). In Dimple’s dream, that fat woman “became Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legends, who had walked through fire at her husband’s request” (6). She thinks of marriage as a source of self-realisation and liberation. Marriage, she thinks, would free her and provide her real life. “Being free and expressing yourself” (20) she supposes, would be the best part of married life.

Dimple’s father Mr. Dasgupta finds a suitable match for Dimple. Amit Kumar Basu, an average middle class unimaginative, young engineer who dreams of making a fortune in America and retiring to live a comfortable rich life in Calcutta. Amit Basu, a consultant Engineer is the match for Dimple. He has already applied for immigration to Canada and US and his job application is also pending in Kenya. Dimple is all ecstatic about her marriage and does a lot of shopping. Finally Dimple is married to Amit Basu and comes to Amit’s residence at Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road after her marriage.

Dimple has always lived in a fantastic world. But after getting married she comes closer to reality which shatters all her dreams. When she confronts the hard realities of life the feathers of her imagination are clipped. All her dreams crumble one by one and she is deeply upset. She thinks that waiting for marriage was better than getting married. She starts hating everything:

She hated the gray cotton with red roses inside yellow circles that her mother-in-law had hung on sagging tapes against the metal bars of the windows. (20)

Her friend, Paramita Ray, whom everybody calls Pixie had brought for her magazines in the days of waiting and she had seen in those magazines how “young marrieds” were always decorating and selecting “their” colours, especially bedroom colours. That was supposed to be the best part of getting married; “being free and expressing yourself” (20). Dimple thinks that marriage has robbed her of all romantic yearnings so tastefully nourished.

Dimple often measures her husband against her ideal man and her life against her dream and finds both of them wanting in many respects. As a result, she is desperate. She tries hard to adjust to Amit’s wishes and be a dutiful wife; she is never quite unaware of the fact that he is not the man of her dreams.

She wanted to dream of Amit but she knew she would not. Amit did not feed her fantasy life; he was merely the provider of small material comforts. In bitter moments she ranked husband, blender, color TV, Cassette tape recorder, stereo, in their order of convenience. (113)

The marital relationship between Dimple and her husband is ruined because Dimple is not able to come to terms with reality. Her attainable happiness with Amit is spoiled by her knowledge of the possibility of greater happiness with a different man. For Dimple, life with Amit, both in India and America, is naturally a big disappointment. She thinks that life has been cruel to her:

Life should have treated her better, should have added and subtracted in different proportions so that she was not left with a chimera. Amit was no more than that. He did not feed her reveries; he was unreal. She was furious, desperate; she felt sick. (156)

With the passing of time the excitement of marriage diminishes and she becomes pregnant, a stage known for vomiting tendency. However, her nauseating proneness is abnormal because she deliberately vomits and never leaves any opportunity of doing so at all hours of the day and night. She feels a strange sensation:

The vomit fascinated her. It was hers; she was locked in the bathroom expelling brownish liquid from her body. She took pride in brownish blossoms... (30)

With the passage of time, her expectations from marriage are utterly frustrated and she begins to develop revulsion for everything around her. Her marriage fails to provide her all the glittering things she had imagined. She therefore dislikes everything associated with her married life. Pregnancy is a boon for Indian women because they are supposed to maintain the continuity of the clan. They are “Shakti-incarnate”. They are the very source of creation. If a woman fails to reproduce a child she is condemned and becomes an object of hatred in society. When Dimple gets pregnant “she thought of ways to get rid of ... Whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes” (31).

Her killing of the mice which looked pregnant also suggests that she does not feel at ease with her pregnancy. She becomes almost hysteric in killing that tiny creature without any rhyme and reason:

She pounded and pounded the baby clothes until a tiny gray creature ran out of the pile, leaving a faint trickle of blood on the linen. She chased it to the bathroom. She shut the door so it would not escape from her this time ... “I’ll get you” she screamed. “There is no way out of this, my friend...” And in an outburst of hatred,

her body shuddering, her wrist taut with fury, she smashed the top of a small gray head. (35)

This act of killing is a manifestation of violence smouldering inside her. Her repulsion with her own pregnancy is born out of her hatred for Amit who fails to feed her fantasy world.

Dimple is about to migrate but she does “not want to carry any relics from her old life” (42). She thinks that old things will remind her of frustrations and irritations. She counts her pregnancy also among the relics and ponders over the ways of getting rid of it. She wants everything to be nice and new when she goes to the US. At last she decides to end it by skipping ropes. The description of her self-abortion is very poignant and touching.

She had skipped rope until her legs grew numb and her stomach burned; then she had poured water from the heavy bucket over her head, shoulders, over the tight little curve of her stomach. She had poured until the last of the blood washed off her legs; then she had collapsed. (42)

This is something which only Dimple can do and her self-abortion raises serious questions regarding her very womanhood. After terminating her pregnancy she hardly gives any afterthought to it. She never repents for the cruel deed she has committed by killing a prospective human life. She remains poised and dispassionate while it should have led her to an emotional upheaval: Rosanne Klass counts it as a serious mistake on Bharati Mukherjee’s part and questions her understanding of Indian culture. In a review of *Wife*, she comments:

For an Indian wife, childlessness is a disaster, pregnancy the achievement that seals her status. To overturn such ingrained values would involve a major emotional upheaval; yet Dimple acts on the vaguest and most undefined impulses, and thinks no more about it. (88)



Mukherjee has already hinted at Dimple's ill mental state. She is simply an individual and her strange actions should not be equated with the values of Indian culture. Dimple's act of abortion "is a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood" (Sharma 15). Symbolically by revoking her motherhood Dimple liberates herself from the traditional role of a Hindu wife of just bearing and rearing a child. Like the Western feminists she asserts her will but her abortive act is a kind of "moral and cultural suicide".

When Amit's confirmation for migration to U.S. comes Dimple's happiness is inexpressible. She prepares well and sees to it that nothing she misses which is necessary for a new life. She feels like being freed from the brazen fetters of servile domesticity. On the eve of their departure, Pixie organizes a grand party at which she invites mostly the media persons. Dimple meets Ratna Das, a middle aged modern wife of a media brat there who does not give any importance to America. She says "It might be fun to go for a vacation... But I could not want to settle there" (46). Pixie echoes the same sentiment "I wouldn't want to feel foreigner all my life" (46). But this hardly deters Dimple from her resolution. For her, "real happiness was just in the movies or in the West" (47).

She had always dreamt of splendid apartment fully furnished and accomplished with all sorts of appliances. Dimple feels irritated even over trifles. One day while Amit is reading something she complains of exhaustion which he attributes to her meager diet. She loses her temper at this inference:

I feel sort of dead inside and you can do is read the paper and talk to me about food. You never listen; You've never listened to me. You hate me. Don't deny it; I know you do. You hate me because I'm not fat and fair. (110)

This furious outburst of Dimple shows her accumulated frustrations. She is suffering from inferiority complex and thinks that she is not able to win her husband's love and affection. Amit may also be blamed for his ignorance of

female psychology but instructs her. “You go out, make friends, do something constructive, not stay at home and think about Calcutta” (111). As Dimple is not well versed in English and speaks only broken English, she is not in a position to go out of her own and make friends. He does not bother for her emotional needs. He takes her out very rarely.

At times when loneliness becomes unbearable, Dimple contemplates as many as seven ways of committing suicide. It seems as if she is in love with whatever is dark, evil, sinister, gruesome – murder, suicide, mugging these are all fascinating words of her. Even her ways of getting rid of life are fanciful like a television advertisement. She cannot trust anybody but media.

Dimple fails to understand why Ina Mullick is so unhappy despite all her apparent fulfillments. At this moment she thinks herself lucky “to be alone among Marsha’s appliances, to explore the wonders of modern American living, unencumbered by philosophical questions about happiness” (136). In the meanwhile Dimple’s mother Mrs. Dasgupta writes about Pixie’s marriage to a 53 year old actor and this news makes her very happy. She feels glad to be the friend of to be super actress.

Dimple is anxious to settle her scores with America. Her spirit rebels, she starts going out with Ina and Milt, wears Marsha’s pants etc., and enjoys all the prohibited freedom. She seduces Milt and keeps it a secret from Amit. When she goes out she puts on Marsha’s tinted sunglasses because “The purple-tinted sunglasses are perhaps the most typical index of American culture. For Dimple, they are a disguise, borrowed from the West, just like Marsha’s clothes and the apartment in which she is living” (Powers 98). Dimple’s gloom deepens with every passing day. She starts realizing: “Her life was slow, full of miscalculations” (178). Amit could only visualize the external changes in Dimple and he explains it as a case of “culture-shock”. He even promises to take her to Calcutta. This does not prove helpful. Dimple starts contemplating the murder of her husband. The violence outside turns inside.

She now fails to differentiate between what she sees on television and what she thinks.

Dimple frees herself from the marriage tie. This is the only act of assertion she can make. Some critics are of the view that Dimple's gruesome act has nothing to do with "cultural-shock" she is not a victim of 'expatriation' but is, instead, 'a victim of her own neurotic sensibility fed on popular advertisement fantasies. K.S. Narayan Rao looks at it from a specific angle: "The novel raises an important question: was the Indian wife happier in India with her limited freedom and greater docility, or does she achieve happiness in her painful search for more individual freedom in the process of maturing" (475).

It is American notion of freedom for women which makes her question her own happiness and freedom. Her emotions which held outlet burst at last and she suffers feats of madness, nightmares, reveries, and insomnia and what one can expect from such a heroine. Her "splintered – self" (Indira 72) finds solution to her problems only in murdering her husband. Thus, it is America which intensifies her confusion and turns the violence inside out and she ends up as a murderess.

The story of Dimple bears a close comparison to one of Anita Desai's novels *Cry, the Peacock* where a heroine kills her husband in a rage of madness. Life is really sad when it is lived without any aim, character and morale. Dimple's married life does not hold her any promise.

An after-dream persisted when she woke up. Someone had murdered her the night before and concealed her corpse among the Bedouin brasses in baskets of indoor plants. (185-86)

The novel *Wife* depicts an Indian woman's marital strife, her exile to America and her spoiling of her own self-conscience. The marital disharmony hastens to bring a tragic end to Basu's family, driving an excoriating tragic irony of life as in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* or as in Thomas Hardy's *Tess*

of the D' Urbervilles. Diane Johnson is perfectly right when he remarks on this novel thus:

It (*Wife*) is a scary story, told with malice and charm through it one becomes somehow better acquainted with Indians of our own society becomes more real and sympathetic than ever it does in those idylls or tragedies of Indian village life or elaborate ways concerning mother in law. Their plight in particular the plight of Dimple and the other women shed a sinister half – life on our own condition. (3)

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