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Schizophrenic Psyche in Bharathi Mukherjee's *Wife*

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Abstract

Bharathi Mukherjee is one of the leading novelists of Indian Diaspora. The subjugated psyche of the Indian immigrants is the main theme of Bharathi Mukherjee's novels. Her main theme refers to the phenomenon of migration and the problems like alienation, identity, neurotic behaviour etc. Hence this paper focuses on the schizophrenic psyche of Dimple, the protagonist of *Wife*. This paper also examines how the schizophrenic psyche leads Dimple to daydreaming, dejection, psychic disorder and at last her disastrous decision of killing her husband.

Keywords

Schizophrenia; Neurosis; Insomnia; Psychic Disintegration.

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“Whatever I learned,

Whatever I knew,

Seems like those faded years of childhood that flew,
Away in some dilemma,
Always in some confusion,
The purpose of this life,
Seems like an illusion!"

- Mehek Bassi, "Chained: Can you Escape Fate?"

The twentieth century is primarily an age of confusion, anxiety and unrest. Its literature deals with the emotional problems of modern men and women owing to a complete transformation. The basic problem of diasporic writings is the feeling of displacement without roots, because the diasporans feel homeless and alienated in the foreign land. The result of the dispersal of roots is concerned with agony, alienation, identity crisis, etc.

Bharathi Mukherjee is an Indian born American novelist. She tries to explore the patterns of multicultural American life. She chooses the life of the Indian immigrants in the USA as a subject matter of her novels. She is different from the other European writers. She herself says,

I am very different from other non-European writers in saying that, to me, the loss of old culture is exciting. Is exhilarating. Is a plus rather than a minus. Just describing the extraordinary wealth and comfort that was natural part of my childhood – and which I would have inherited, in whatever damaged ways, if I had stayed on in India – made me realize that I was thrilled to have the opportunity to give it up. To assume a new identity. The kind of Third World hierarchy where your opportunities are closed by caste, gender, or family was horrendous to me. (Moline 219)

As immigrants they have to compromise and undergo a process of adjustments which lead to the transformation of their entire life system and their own personalities. She has examined the institution of marriage in the modern world which demands total transformation of men and women on

socio-cultural scenario. Bharathi Mukherjee aims at presenting hypersensitive heroines. These women are deprived of their own identity. She is conscious about the existence of her women in their new land.

Schizophrenia is a mental disorder that generally appears in late adolescence or early adulthood, however, it can emerge at any time in life. It is one of many brain diseases that may include delusions, loss of personality, confusion, agitation, social withdrawal, psychosis, and bizarre behaviour.

Bharathi Mukherjee's *Wife* has a significant place in the study of immigration. The novelist tries to depict the schizophrenic mind of the protagonist Dimple in *Wife*. Dimple Dasgupta shows the symptoms of psychic displacement and dislocation of her mind which is evident when she was in Calcutta before her marriage and later it is provoked when she is displaced in America after her marriage. *Wife* is an exceptional novel which presented an exploration of the heroine's sensitive psyche. It depicts the tragic life of Dimple who is transmigrated from her own motherland to a completely alien culture.

Bharathi Mukherjee presents the quiescent life of a quiet, submissive and passive Bengali girl Dimple Dasgupta. When the novel begins, Dimple is willing to get married but it is difficult to get a husband for her. Bharathi Mukherjee tells "She wanted a different life- an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris- so she placed her faith in neurosurgeons and architects" (*Wife* 3).

As other girls in her neighborhood got married, she accused herself and developed a 'complex' which leads to distorted soul. It suggests the emotional displacement where the mind and the body lack total synchronization. It results in Dimple who is slowly becoming schizophrenic. Her father finds Amit Basu as her bridegroom. Amit dreams of marrying a tall, fat woman who has fluency in English and Dimple desires to marry a rich neurosurgeon. They marry each other against their wishes.

Dimple's reaction to natural phenomenon is abnormal. When she is pregnant, she starts vomiting. She is delighted by vomits but disgusted to be pregnant. The reason is that she believes that the child will be a barrier to her migration to America. It is a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood. She considers that the child will be a deterrent to her migration to America. And she starts developing hostility towards her husband in imagination because it is not possible for her to show in her practical life. This issue of imagination leads Dimple to develop neurotic behaviour.

Indian society used to give little freedom to the girls before their marriage and the girls nurture a feeling that marriage is their doorway to happiness. Since Dimple experiences bitterness after her marriage, she thinks that her motherhood will steal her dreamy aspirations of leading a life in her dreamland of milk and honey. So, she cruelly aborts the baby.

The couple immigrates to New York where they stay at Jyoti and Meena Sen's house. Contrary to her expectations, she is frustrated by the exposure of American culture. Amit does not get a job. They do not lead a happy life due to their poor economic condition. Dimple believes that, "a man without a job was not a man at all" (*Wife* 102). There is an incident, during the first week of their life. Dimple enters a meat-shop to buy cheesecake. When she asks for a cheesecake, the shopkeeper stares at her and directs her to the cheese shop. She reacts very strongly by imagining that the shopkeeper will shoot her with his gun. She thinks as in the words of the novelist, "She was caught in the crossfire of an American communication. She could not understand. She felt she'd come very close to getting killed on her third morning in America" (60). Failure to communicate with the outside world which is alien to her, she starts feeling insecure. Asnani rightly comments,

Dimple is entrapped in a dilemma of tensions, American culture and society and the traditional constraints surrounding an Indian

wife, between a feminist desire to be assertive and independent and the Indian need to a submissive and self-effacing. (42)

In America, violence is a part of life. Dimple, a typical Indian woman is exposed to the frequent announcements of murder through many ways such as newspapers, car radio and common casual conversations. She cannot understand the ways of the world and feel dejected and disappointed. She cannot enjoy her life there and frequently trapped by mental disorders and attempted suicide. It shows that she is affected by insomnia. And she starts day dreaming and keeps away from the people.

Dimple finds herself an alien. She feels herself to be an alien because she cannot understand that how Indian people in America adjusted with the American life. She finds solace in watching TV and reading magazines. She is uprooted from her family and her familiar world, and projected into a social vacuum where the media becomes her surrogate community, her global village. New York intensifies her frustrations and unhooks her further from reality.

Dimple starts to relate to the illusory dreamy world which is shown on the TV, she forgets her problems, but that does not provide proper solution to her problems. Bharati Mukherjee writes,

The women on television led complicated lives, become pregnant frequently and under suspicious circumstances...murdered or were murdered, were brought to trial and released, they suffered through the ping-pong volley of their fates with courage. (*Wife* 73)

Then she starts finding faults with Amit because she thinks that he is responsible for her insecure life in America.

Dimple creates a hollow between her and Amit. She is forlorn and her behaviour shows her fragmentation. She suffers from psychological imbalances like day time sleeping, her nightmares and her uncertainty. Amit is not aware of her changes. "Her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne."(*Wife* 117)

Dimple gets attracted towards violence and always talks about murders. The recurrent news about murders in America reduced her sense of guilt. She realises that her husband is unfit to succeed in her dreamland. She also considers herself to be unfit in America as she is born and brought up in a totally different culture which is responsible for her to adjust to the ways of American life. Dimple confesses that her conjugal life is a total failure. She then wants to kill Amit without any guilt. She gets completely cut off from the outside world. She cannot realize her state of mind. The lack of inner security makes a block in her mind.

Dimple moves close with Milt Glasser in order to fulfill her dreams which are ignored by her own husband Amit. In the beginning, she feels embarrassed, but later she finds him as her emotional supporter. "He was the only one she could talk to. With the others, people like Amit and Ina and even Meena Sen she talked silences." (*Wife* 191) But after sometime, she finds Milt as a man of mystery and feels guilty of her extra marital relationship with him. And she accuses Amit who is responsible for her to develop this sort of awful relationship with Milt. That anger leads her to murder her husband.

Dimple's musings, daydreaming and hallucinations about death come out openly through her actions. She starts hating everything around her because she thinks that is beyond her limits to change her environment. She compares her happy Calcutta life and threatening New York life.

She is scared of self-service elevators, of policemen, of gadgets and appliances. She does not want to wear western clothes as she thinks as would be mistakenly taken for a Puerto Rican. She does not want to lose her identity but feels isolated, trapped, alienated, and marginalized. (*Wife* 84)

The contemplations, dreams and hallucinations about death start expressing themselves in action. Her hatred starts destroying things around her. She shuts herself in the room throughout the day and night and starts to

disconnect with the society. She talks to herself and writes imaginary letters. For her, the future is disgusting and the present life idle.

Dimple's sick psyche is preoccupied with death and destruction. Whenever she sees Amit, she cannot avoid the feeling of murdering him. She thinks Amit has failed to fulfill his promises - a fanciful life in America. She plans ten different ways to end her life. "Setting fire to a sari had been one of the seven types of suicide Dimple had recently devised" (*Wife* 115).

She has become schizophrenic, has seen her body and soul apart. She has emotionally broken down and her husband Amit fails to note her changes. She cannot cope up with the pressures of her dream world, and she murders her husband Amit.

Wife depicts an Indian woman's exile in America and spoiling of her own self-conscience. Diano Johnson remarks,

If (*Wife*) is a scary story, told with malice and charm, and 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 sages concerning mother-in-law. Their plight, in particular the plight of Dimple and the other women, sheds a sinister half-light on our own condition. (3)

In this novel, Mukherjee has concentrated on the female protagonist's disillusionment in her life. The cultural conflict leads her to psychic disorder. She depicts the disorienting and dehumanizing effects of urban American society. Wade-Karen comment, "The end of the story encapsulated both the strength of her spirited struggle to refashion herself and the difficulty of achieving wholeness when one is stretched between two cultures" (17).

Wife is an analysis of a psychologically disturbed woman's responses to conjugal life and its problems. Bharati Mukherjee has explored the psychological niches of an immigrant. Dimple's splintered-self finds solution to

her problems only in murdering her husband. By stabbing her husband, she becomes a victim of expatriation, a victim of neurosis and a victim of schizophrenia.

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