

CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT AND THE PSYCHE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S "WIFE"

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Abstract: Bharati Mukherjee is a distinguished Indian author who holds a prominent place among Indian novelists writing in English. Mukherjee is widely recognized as a representative voice of the expatriate-immigrant experience. Her novels address the challenges of adapting to foreign cultures and the identity crises faced by women in the diaspora. Her works are about self-realization and reinvention. The search for personal meaning, identity, and a connection to one's roots are central themes in her stories, especially in the lives of her female characters, who grapple with the conflict between tradition and modernity. Bharati Mukherjee's novel "Wife" explores the complex dynamics of the human psyche through the protagonist Dimple Dasgupta's journey. Dimple's psyche is a complex interplay of cultural expectations, personal desires, and emotional struggles.

Key Words: Displacement, Diaspora, Psyche, Identity, Marginalization, Rootlessness, Expatriate.

Introduction: During her time in Canada, Mukherjee faced racial and regional discrimination. She became a victim of cultural and racial marginalization, enduring humiliation such as being thrown out of hotels without her white husband, forced to sit at the back of buses, and being spat upon. These experiences of oppression led her to become isolated, fearful, and obsessive. The emotional toll of these experiences left a lasting impact on her, which she expressed in both her personal and political writings, as well as in her Canadian fiction. The cultural shock she encountered in Canada fundamentally changed her, both as a woman and a writer. Themes of Canada's unwelcoming atmosphere and the lack of recognition for her writing are recurring in Mukherjee's early works. It was during these difficult years of racial discrimination in Canada that she wrote her first two novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*.

Discussion: Bharati Mukherjee's second novel, *Wife* (1975), a finalist for the Governor General's Award, reflects a transition in her own life from the 'expatriate' phase to the 'immigrant' phase. The novel incorporates her personal feelings of disappointment and depression as an Indian immigrant in Canada. While *Wife* is set in New York, it likely reflects Mukherjee's own experiences in Toronto. Through the story, she explores the complexities of being caught between two worlds, two ideologies, and two cultures, while highlighting the courage and strength needed to navigate and survive this duality. The novel delves into the immigrant woman's experience, the East-West encounter, social oppression, and cultural conflict.

The story focuses on Dimple Dasgupta, a middle-class Bengali woman who moves from Calcutta to New York with her husband, Amit, an engineer from IIT, Kharagpur. While Amit is preoccupied with earning money, Dimple seeks freedom and happiness. Entering the United States without mental preparation, Dimple is overwhelmed by cultural shock and struggles to understand the cultural codes of her new environment. She is not interested in seeking emotional support from Indian expatriates in the U.S., as she recognizes the inadequacies in their way of life. Dimple finds herself torn between the 'expatriate' phase, where she is part of the 'Ballygunge ghetto,' and the 'immigrant' phase, living in the 'Manhattan enclave.' She also faces an internal conflict between being the traditional, submissive Indian wife and the modern, assertive, independent woman.

Dimple's sense of rootlessness stems from a deep psychological trait—her inability to accept or adapt to her surroundings. Before her marriage, she fantasized about marriage as a transformative event that would bring her fortune, freedom, and perfect happiness. She envisioned it as a path to independence, joy, and a life full of social gatherings: "Marriage would bring her independence, happiness, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for charities." She believed marriage would open the door to a fulfilling life, and that love

would be clear and ideal on her wedding day. For Dimple, her premarital life was like a dress rehearsal for her real life.

The prolonged wait for the "perfect" man caused her significant anxiety, leaving her physically worn down with constant colds, headaches, and a sense of deep nervousness. Her wasted years seemed to weigh heavily on her, manifesting in her physical state—giving her a watchful squint and a slight curve to her spine. Despite her eagerness to marry, Dimple could not settle into married life with Amit. She was more focused on migrating to the U.S. and had always lived in a fantasy world of her own making. However, once faced with the harsh realities of life, the idealized images she had created in her mind began to fall apart. Her dreams shattered one by one, leaving her frustrated and disillusioned. The suffocating environment of the Basu family's apartment in a cramped building stifled her individuality. The lack of freedom, privacy, basic amenities, and the constant tension of living in a joint family drove her to despair. She felt that waiting for marriage was better than the reality of being married. She developed a deep hatred for everything around her:

“She hated the grey cotton with red roses inside yellow circles that her mother-in-law had hung on sagging tapes against the metal bars of the windows.”

All of her premarital illusions quickly dissolved. Dimple equates womanhood with wifehood, and as she prepares to migrate, she refuses to carry any remnants of her past life. She believes that anything from her past will only serve to remind her of her disappointments. Even her pregnancy becomes something to discard—she views it as an invasion of her body. Feeling that no one consulted her before depositing the foetus inside her, Dimple decides to “get rid of whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes.” While this act of abortion could be seen as a sign of psychological abnormality, for Dimple, it represents “a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood.”

Dimple's immigrant journey is framed by her search for love, happiness, and independence, but her transition into the United States is marked by a sense of alienation and dissatisfaction. Initially, she begins her life in America as a typical Indian 'expatriate,' fascinated by the material trappings of Western life: "big cars, television, lovely furniture, rugs, Teflon-coated iron, and queen-sized beds." Even something as mundane as sugar becomes an object of awe for her, described as “beautiful, very fine, very white, without stone chips or ants.” This idealization reflects her naïve perception of America, which she sees as a land of plenty and opportunity. However, Dimple's reality soon shatters when she is forced to share a flat with Meena and Jyoti. Despite her attempts to pretend that she loves the place, she loathes it deeply:

“The Sen's living room... had now become hideous to her... It was all so shabby, so bare... No one knew how she hated the furniture. Nobody could tell she really wanted to break and smash each piece and squirt dust on the walls.”

This represents Dimple's inner turmoil and her dissatisfaction with the superficial aspects of her new life. She dreams of moving to an independent apartment in Manhattan, hoping that it will bring her the happiness and fulfilment she craves. But when they eventually move into Marsha's flat near the university, she feels let down, and her dreams begin to collapse inwardly like a star.

Despite living in America, Dimple is never able to feel truly at home. Amit recognizes this, pointing out that Dimple's heart is still in Calcutta. Her attempts at Americanization are superficial and shallow, as they revolve around small gestures such as trying new recipes or taking showers at night instead of during the day. These surface-level efforts reveal her inability to mature or adapt to her surroundings. Her rootlessness is self-inflicted, a result of what can be described as her "Sado-masochism."

As Dimple becomes more isolated, her loneliness intensifies. This loneliness is not just the familiar isolation of an expatriate; it is a deep, existential separation from herself, from the social and cultural environment, and from life itself. She becomes detached, feeling like "a shadow without feeling," more disconnected from Amit, the Indian community, and everything she once knew. America, which she once viewed as a land of hope and possibility, has now outwitted her. She is consumed by nostalgia, longing for a place where she can feel a sense of belonging. She struggles to comprehend how she could live in a country “where every other woman

was a stranger, where she felt different, ignorant, exposed to ridicule in the elevator.” This sense of not fitting in, of being an outsider, leaves her disillusioned and emotionally drained, unable to bridge the gap between her past and her present.

Dimple’s life in America is marked by isolation and a sense of displacement. Her entire world is confined to her apartment, and she relies heavily on the media for emotional sustenance, as it becomes her only "friend." The foreignness of American life, especially the everyday conveniences and cultural norms, intensifies her feeling of alienation. Dimple’s disgust with American English and the American system is heightened by even small, seemingly trivial things. For example, she is afraid to operate the self-service elevators, a fear that is symbolic of her struggle to adapt to the new, modern, and mechanized world of America. This fear reflects her inability to transition smoothly from her traditional upbringing to the technological and cultural demands of the West.

Linda Sandler provides an insightful analysis of Dimple's predicament:

“Dimple emigrates to the electronic age with her traditional values almost intact, only partly modified by the pop culture of modern Calcutta.”

Dimple’s inability to reconcile her past and present is at the heart of her difficulties. She feels trapped between two worlds, one that is fading and one that she cannot fully embrace. Her transition from "Before" (her life in Calcutta) to "After" (her life in America) is marked by a sense of disconnection and frustration. In her mind, violence becomes a means to solve the overwhelming emotional turmoil she experiences, as she struggles to find a way to negotiate her identity.

Dimple's difficulties in America are further exacerbated by her inability to assimilate. She feels disconnected from American life, particularly because her religious practices—specifically the celebration of Durga Puja—are misunderstood and dismissed. For Dimple, religion is an integral part of life, and her failure to connect with others over shared religious rituals is a key aspect of her sense of isolation. Mukherjee poignantly highlights the gap in shared cultural experience, and Dimple’s inability to connect with others in America leaves her feeling lost.

Her roots in Calcutta make her painfully aware of the difference between her former home and her new environment. Dimple reflects on how easy it was to live, communicate, and feel safe in Calcutta. She never felt afraid of policemen there, whose faces were familiar and reassuring. But in America, everything feels unfamiliar and hostile. The gadgets and appliances that define modern American life overwhelm her, and she resists adopting Western customs, including wearing Western clothes. She doesn't want to lose her identity, but at the same time, she feels trapped, isolated, and marginalized by the pressure to adapt to an unfamiliar culture.

Dimple's internal conflict is profound. She is caught between the traditional restrictions placed on an Indian wife and the modern, more independent role that American culture promotes. This conflict mirrors the feminist struggle she faces—her desire to be independent and assertive conflicts with the ingrained expectation of being a submissive, self-effacing Indian wife. This tension builds to such a point that at times, when loneliness becomes unbearable, Dimple contemplates suicide. Her fantasies of death are disturbing, and even her ideas about ending her life take on a grotesque, surreal quality, as if influenced by the media she consumes.

Her emotional struggles manifest in a complete disconnection from her own body, which she begins to view as alien: "her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne." This feeling of detachment from herself, her identity, and the world around her is a direct result of her uprooting. As Linda Sandler explains,

"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."

The media, for Dimple, replaces the supportive, understanding relationships she once had. Instead of feeling part of a real community, she is adrift in an emotional vacuum, disconnected from the reality around her. New York, instead of offering opportunities for growth and fulfilment, only intensifies her feelings of frustration and alienation.

Dimple's mind is always occupied with the news about rape and mugging; she always feels that her window is being broken. In a state of nervousness, she hurts Amit with knife when he comes from behind to embrace her. She is all apologetic and blames America for her timidity: "This wouldn't have happened if we had stayed in Calcutta. I was never so nervous back home." Dimple's sadness deepens with every passing day. She starts realizing that her life was slow, full of miscalculations. She wants to settle her scores with America. Her spirit rebels, she starts enjoying all the prohibited freedom. She keeps her seduction of Milt secret from Amit. Amit could only visualize the external changes in Dimple and he explains it as a case of "Culture-shock." Dimple turns neurotic and is not able to differentiate between what she sees and what she experiences in real life. She fails to distinguish between reality and alternate reality. She does not know how to interpret cultural codes. Nor does she know how to handle her secret relationship with Milt Glasser. So, fear of violence, insomnia, pressure from the Indian expatriates on the one hand, and Ina's American way of life on the other hand, Amit's callous attitude and lingering thoughts of suicide crack her fragile self. She is now an alienated being undergoing the supposed after effects of alienation. The idea of slaughtering her husband fascinates her. The ultimate end of such disturbed existence is the eruption of violence that had been brewing in her. She thinks:

"She would kill Amit and hide his body in the freezer. The extravagance of the scheme delighted her, made her feel very American somehow, almost like a character in a TV Series."

Conclusion: In sum, Dimple's immigrant journey reflects a deep psychological crisis rooted in cultural dislocation, identity confusion, and an inability to reconcile her past with her present. She is trapped between two worlds, neither of which she can fully inhabit, and her sense of rootlessness becomes both a physical and emotional burden. Her reliance on the media, the only source of connection she feels, highlights the depth of her isolation and disillusionment in her new life.

References:

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