

Women, Resistance and Revolt: Locating Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Wife

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Abstract – *A woman is always subordinated to a man in Indian patriarchal social set up that could be traced in long Indian history. In the same way, women characters are traditionally portrayed and coloured as a submissive, passive and docile in Indian Writings. It is none other than Bharati Mukherjee who presents woman as a subject to resist and to revolt in Indian English writings. She tries to reshape the identity of a woman who dares to rebel and to insurgent. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the significant novelists of the Indian Diaspora in the United States. Her subject of a woman includes resistance and wrangle that begins in Indian diasporic writing. Bharati Mukherjee's Wife unfolds many threads of woman-self; as an alienated and lost identity in the novel. The paper tries to critically examine Bharati Mukherjee's Wife. The paper also aims to highlight the issues of woman migration; absence of home as if absence self within, in-between experiencing double marginalization; as an immigrant and immigrant-women. The paper also tries to focus on the psychology of migrant-woman in the context of the novel. The paper also attempts to co-relate Bharati Mukherjee's experiences as an immigrant woman and her depiction of the major character in the novel; Wife.*

Keywords: Woman, Expatriate, Resistance, Revolt, Identity, Bharati Mukherjee, Wife

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INTRODUCTION

Award-Winning Indian-born American author Bharati Mukherjee was born in Calcutta in 1940. She is the second of three daughters born to Bengali – Speaking Hindu Brahmin parents. She is an American writer of Indian origin who writes about the immigrant experience of a woman from India in the United States and the problems and predicaments faced by them in adjusting to the culture of the outlandish land. She has written eight novels two collections of short stories such as darkness and the Middleman and the other stories, and in collaboration with her husband wrote two non-fiction books. Her novel deals with expatriates, exiles, immigrants from Third World countries, especially from India. The Tiger's Daughter, Wife, Jasmine, Leave It to Me, The Tree bride and Miss New India are her unrivalled novels in the exile world. It will deal with Mukherjee's contribution to Indian literature in English.

Her novel *Wife* deals with the experience of the protagonist 'Dimple' in the novel. Bharati Mukherjee has depicted the Indian woman protagonist and how she undergoes her immigrant experiences and the challenges that she faced in America. It deals with the gist of the assignment and the narrative techniques used by Mukherjee in her novel *Wife*.

Bharati Mukherjee holds a noteworthy place among the Indian woman novelists writing in English. She belongs to the body of writers who willingly or unwillingly have left their countries of origin and made their homes elsewhere. Her novel like *Wife* explores the shifting identities of diasporic women, both in present-day United States, Canada, and India, as well as in the past. The novel of Bharati Mukherjee's is self-actualizing. Quest for the definition of self and search for identity is the main feature of her protagonist who is seen caught in the variability of tradition and modernity. She neither can completely segregate herself from her past nor has any assurance in the future.

Bharati Mukherjee married to a Canadian writer and in 1968 she immigrated to Canada and in the long run, in the year 1972 a denizen citizen. She describes those fourteen years of her life as the strenuous one. She found herself victimized and treated as a member of the "visible minority". Despite her tough and challenging life in Canada, she managed to write her two novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*. Her husband Clark Blaise, helped her in her fiction and co-authored with him two non-fictional works i.e. *Days and Night in Calcutta* (1977) and *The Sorrow and the Terror*. Bharati Mukherjee collected her experience and sentiments in all her write-ups. Her works evolve

her mental status in many of its parts. Fed up with Canada, she and her family moved to the United States in 1980. She was awarded a National Endowment for Arts grant. She has had different experiences in her life. She has been described as a writer who has lived through several phases of life i.e. a colonial than National subject in India. She led a life of exile as a post-colonial Indian in Canada. Eventually, she introduced herself as a permanent U.S resident.

The story of *Wife* revolves around the protagonist Dimple Das Gupta, a product of Calcutta middle class that values servile and submissiveness in women. According to her, marriage is a blessing in disguise as it will bring freedom, fortune and happiness to her. She has an arranged marriage; her father Das Gupta married her with Amit Basu with complete rites and rituals of traditional Hindu marriage. Dimple Basu has always lived in a world which is created by her – a fantasy world nevertheless all her imaginations are swept under the carpet when she confronted the harsh realities of life. Amit Basu was not the man Dimple is imagined for her husband, she doesn't feel easy there, she neither like Amit's mother nor his sister. Her mother-in-law wants to change Dimple's name as Nandini.

Over time the experiment of marriage shrinks and she becomes pregnant. From the commencement, we perceive that the Dimple is not like a normal girl. As pregnancy is boon for Indian women but Dimple, a freakish and an unusual woman who wants to get rid of it, so she decides to abort her pregnancy. Due to her hatred for Amit, her abhorrence with her pregnancy has developed as he fails to fulfil her fantasies of a fancy world. She feels that motherhood will rob her of the pleasures of leading a comfortable in a foreign country, "doesn't want to carry any relics from her old life" (42). Consequently, by skipping the ropes she vigorously aborts the baby. Not only this, she even does not rue for this action.

Dimple is grasped by a sense of nostalgia and reminiscence. Bharati Mukherjee presents the world of Dimple as a world of daydreams and nightmares and her morbid psyche through the series of macabre images. It is just beyond her understanding "how could she live in a country... where every other woman was a stranger, where she felt different, ignorant, exposed to ridicule in the elevator?"(11). In order to cope up in New York City as the young wife in an arranged marriage, Dimple lacked the internal strengths and resources

Bharati Mukherjee lays hold of us deep into the psyche of Dimple as she makes a transition from being single to marrying a husband chosen by her father. As the novel makes headway, leaving the reader shocked by the Dimple hidden personality. Dimple tries to reconcile the Bengali ideal of the perfect submissive wife with the demand of her new American life. Dimple is characterized as a young naive Indian woman who is a wife regarded as a

weak one as she fails to make the changeover from one world to another. And At the end of the story being suppressed by such man and attempts to be ideal Bengali wife she becomes thwarted and out of fear and personal precariousness, she ultimately murders her husband and eventually commits suicides.

Wife as the name suggests it is the story of a wife. This novel which is centred on the character Dimple Mukherjee grows matures, rebels, resist, revolt, kills and finally dies making the title *Wife* aptly echoes to the plot of the novel. Jasbir Jain points out, "Mukherjee's novels are representative of the expatriate sensibility"(12). By smashing their ties with their native culture she portrays the predicament of the exiles that are desperate and distressed.

Mukherjee's novel *Wife* belongs to the period of transition from the expatriate phase to the immigrant phase. Her fiction portrays expatriate characters and their encounter and experiences. Dimple doesn't accept America as her permanent destination and prefers to return to India as she fails to attain her identity in the process of uprooting and replanting from one culture to another particularly to Calcutta. The novel is a clear depiction of the life of an Indian woman whose lifestyle is wholly untraditional, and whose mind is disturbed due to neuroses. Through the encompassing of letters, advertisements, songs and other unvaried information within the novel *Wife*, Mukherjee elusively portrays modern woman's life in an alien land.

Dimple who migrates to America with her husband Amit Basu suffer also due to her psychic problem, she is misled by the evil impact of American culture to murder her husband as she is used to watching T.V. shows which depict murder and barbarity. According to Justine D. Edwards, " All of these forms of violence have arisen out of the movement, migration and displacement of people through imperialism"(73). Dimple turns neurotic and fails to differentiate between what she sees on reel life and what she experiences in real life.

The name 'Dimple' is a purposive choice of the author. She quotes the Oxford English Dictionary meaning of 'Dimple' "as any slight surface depression"(1) at the beginning of the novel. The word "depression" present in the meaning of her name never allows Dimple to get rid of the various stages of frustrations caused by the excessive cultural conflicts, but to some extent reasoning her frustration only due to cultural conflict is partially true. While from the very beginning of the novel, we noticed Dimple seems to be different from normal girls. She always lives in a world of fantasy, when all her dreams shattered she becomes upset, and starts hating and detesting everything around her. Amit spends more time in his work and thinks that

providing material comfort is enough to make Dimple happy, but fail to understand her emotional needs. The lack of communication between Amit and Dimple develop a rift between them which widens day by day and ultimately ruins their relationship. Dimple tries to assimilate into the American culture but flunked due to unshared communication.

Shyam M. Asnani attributes Dimple's mental state to the 'dilemma of cultures': "Dimple is entrapped in a dilemma of tensions between 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 be submissive and self-effacing."(42). Dimple's alienation is rooted not in loneliness, in isolation or cultural differences but her estrangement from her past and her inner being, though other critics commended⁶⁶ the novel for its representation of the plight of Indian emigrants in America.

Thus, Bharati Mukherjee like the other diasporic writers, especially V.S Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee operates at two levels of consciousness, often shifting her focus back and forth between the alien and the native world. She eases with discovering her identity as the mainstream American, her skill with the dialogue and incident familiar to the dominant society, her denial to be marginalized and her out and out proficiency of English is predictable when we go at her biography. "In American fiction, she finds a kind of energy that fiction from other cultures seems to lackshe writes some stories from a very authoritative point of view, with others she uses an intimate, textured style and the first person view."(Dhawan13).

Wife is a story which is a carefully crafted narrative by Bharati Mukherjee. She uses the fuel of emotion to drive the sense of alienation, expatriation skillfully and eloquently. Her words were so alive that the power of sensation is exemplified in the speeches uttered from her life-like sketched characters especially Dimple. She has a phenomenal talent for giving the readers what they want and she writes what matters to people.

Feminine sensibility and immigrant sensibility in Bharati Mukherjee's novels provide adequate scope for a gender study. She can be compared with other immigrant woman write like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala whose novels not only deal with rootlessness and assimilation but also the feminine psyche, theme of guilt and expiation, exile, trauma, and culture conflicts.

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