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Fleeing unto Fantasy: An Escapism for Dimple in Bharati Mukherjee's Wife

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Abstract:

Bharathi Mukherjee, a prolific writer of diasporic literature, focuses on the conflict arising between fantasy and reality in most of her novels. Her oeuvre is a ventilation of the feminine anguish caught in the clutches of patriarchy. This paper seeks to critique the path ventured upon by Dimple, in the novel *Wife*, who storms her way into reality through the realm of fantasy, not realizing that this leads to alienation and depression in the end. Consequently, the protagonist, in order to overcome the trials and tribulations of life, destroys herself by excessive introversion and over sensitized imagination. The psychological need for self-esteem and identity gets fulfilled in her only through these imaginations and fantasies that also make her life miserable. To override the patriarchal system by means of psychological overplay reduces Dimple to a phobic personality.

Keywords: Conflict, Fantasy, Reality, Alienation, Phobic.

“Perhaps, humankind cannot bear too much reality, but neither can it bear too much unreality, too much abuse of the truth.”

Saul Bellow, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech

Fantasy, according to Webster's Dictionary, is the forming of mental images especially wondrous or strange and fantastic, suggesting a wild lack of restraint, fanciful as extreme as to lose touch with reality. Fantasy is a sequence of imagined events, usually of pleasant and satisfying experiences and the imaginations are shocking distortions or incongruous, sometimes ludicrous as in fairy tales and more often pitiful or tragic. It is definitely a deviation from what is normal, real or expected. When people experience a psychological breakdown as a result of certain rigid circumstances, they sometimes take refuge in unrestrained imagination leading to capricious behaviour and volatile actions.

In literature, writers use fantasy as a means of reinterpreting reality. Fantasy is used at different levels- imagination at a purely lingual level, as wishful thinking and personal aspiration and as a private world characterized by an obsession or a psychological fear confined in some other ways. The protagonists travel through a world of fantasy with the intention of coming to terms with the reality of their situations. It implies a shedding of beliefs and myths and adjusting to the external reality. It is true that the fantastic is unreal, that it does not exist in fact; but it must be acknowledged that fantasy has its origin in reality which constitutes the take off point for all fantastic elaboration. Ann Swinfen in her critical work, *In Defense of Fantasy* remarks that:

...the secondary world, like all fantasy requires a firm basis in primary world reality. The inhabitants and affairs of a secondary world will awaken an interest in the reader only if he can feel some underlying comprehension of and sympathy for them. (76)

It is an actual desire, fear or obsession, which finds expressions in different customs. Another prerequisite / condition for fantasy is a heightened awareness of one's surroundings, and once it takes shape, fantasy is more often than not concrete rather than abstract. This concretization takes place through sensuous awareness, imaginative involvement or even imagery. Eric S Rabkin in his *The Fantastic in Literature* suggests a useful working definition of literary fantasy which leads to several points about this imaginative mode in both the visual and verbal arts:

While fairy tales use the World of Enchantment as their location, and are therefore highly fantastic, a true fantasy such as *Alice* continues to reserve its ground rules again and again.... Fantasies may be generally distinguished from other narratives by this: the very nature of ground rules, of how we know things, on what basis we make assumptions, in short, the problem of knowing infects Fantasies at all levels, in their settings, in their methods, in their characters, in their plots. (37)

Fantasy and the conception of what is fantastic depends upon one's view of reality- what one finds improbable and unexpected follows from what one finds probable and likely, and the fantastic will therefore necessarily vary with the individual and the age. Bharati Mukherjee's protagonists exhibit similar bouts of fantasy in their moments of distress and agony. R.K.Dhawan rightly observes, "The collapse of reason is a natural consequence of the

clash between the fantastic and the real and the clash becomes unavoidable when the boundary lines between the two refuse to shift.” (70)

Mukherjee’s characters do not enter the magical worlds of Alice or the Looking-glass house but probe into the deep recesses of their own subconscious mind and create situations that envision their unfulfilled desires. Fantasy is also an escape from the humdrum realities of everyday life. As Rosemary Jackson points out in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, “They assert what they are telling is real-relying on the conventions of realistic fiction to do so-and then they proceed to break that assumption of realism by introducing what within these terms ‘is manifestly unreal’.”(34)

Sometimes fantasy also questions the nature of reality. In some novels, fantasy sustains life and when it is destroyed it brings about death or it leads to murder and insanity as in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife*. But reality is never the same. Once it is gratified by the fantastic, it emerges as a new realization of some inner truth bringing about a change of perspective.

The conflict between the fantastic and the real is perceptible in many of the incidents in the novels of Mukherjee. The fears of the actual are projected through recoiling from the surroundings. It ends up in estrangement not only from fellow human beings but also from innermost nature having nothing within and without to rely upon in moments of crises. In the present century, many are languishing in frustration, disappointment and disillusionment. It is this sense of alienation that becomes the resource of fantasy in their life. The lacuna between what an individual aspires for and the hard reality of what is achieved has an insidious effect in the inner being of the individual. The wounds incurred thus and the memory of it, or the scars on the psyche, forces a cynical attitude towards the established norms and values of society. Kalpana Wadrekar observes “Mukherjee explores the sensibility which is too inarticulate to relate to the outside world and which loses the track of the borderline between the real and the unreal world mistaking the unreal world for the real one.” (65)

Alienation and unreal existence are two main concerns of Bharati Mukherjee. *Wife*, in its depiction of the central character's alienation and depression, also articulates a bleak vision of an immigrant woman's failure to 'assimilate' into Western culture. Although the novel is set in New York City, Mukherjee has commented that it in fact reflects her life in Toronto. Mukherjee’s, *Wife*, is a very detached story that shows Dimple the protagonist as a young, guileless Indian woman, trying to resolve the Bengali ideal of the perfect, passive wife with the cultural and social demands of her new American life. As a young woman who was raised to be passive, Dimple lacks the inner strength and resources it takes to cope in New York City as a young wife in an arranged marriage.

Again in this novel, Mukherjee deals with the impediments that come from being torn between two worlds and the power and mettle it takes to endure and, ultimately, live. *Wife* is often dismissed by many because its heroine fails to make a victorious alteration from one world to another, and when the assimilation is not successful she is often judged to be "weak". Dimple, an immature girl, constantly dreams of marriage, "Marriage, she was sure, would free her, fill her with passion. Discreet and virgin, she waited for real life to begin" (Mukherjee,13) and she hallucinated in the nights, "erotic fantasies began to sneak into her mind"(Mukherjee,12), "Tight, twisted shapes lunged at her from behind cupboards or tried to wrestle her into bed"(Mukherjee,12). After a painful wait, she is finally married to Amit Kumar Basu, an unimaginative young engineer who plans to immigrate to the United States. She has persistently imagined her future husband to be the very embodiment of the virtues of the commercial society. She reconstructs her ideal man from the faces she views from magazines:

She borrowed a forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips, eyes and chin from a body - builder and shoulders ad, the stomach and legs from a trousers ad and put the ideal man by herself in a restaurant on Park Street or by the side of a pool at a five – star hotel. He wore blue bathing trunks, there was no ugly black hair on his back and shoulder blades as he leaped feet first into the pool while she stood on the edge in a scarlet sari with a gold border, behind wraparound sunglasses, and trailed her toes in the water. (Mukherjee, 23)

Dimple aspires for the freedom and love she fantasized to be real in her marriage but feels cheated of her romantic fantasies. She resents her new home, her new life with a new family, which apparently is incapable of feeding her fantasies concerning marriage. Her fantasies and the knowledge of possible happiness with her ideal man ruins her actual happiness that she could've gained from her marital relationship with Amit:

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. (Mukherjee, 113)

She is filled with grief, resentment and anger when things do not happen the way she wanted it. She is trapped between two cultures and aspires to create a third, an alternate reality- the world of American television. She becomes a complete victim of fantasy. She starts chasing her dream of liberation and self-fulfillment in the United States of America but is not bothered about the means of pursuing it. Dimple's resolve to realize her farfetched dreams ends up

making her stubborn beyond being sane. She becomes an easy prey to the various magazine and TV advertisements. Her daydream world became an obsessive passion. William P. Scott in Dictionary of Sociology has defined daydream as:

A type of mental fantasy that may be, but is not necessarily, wishful or purposeless thinking or a withdrawal from reality. For most people it is often an important way to preview or experience various possible roles they believe they desire or they expect to play in the future. Hence daydreams may not only be creative, but may also play an essential role in the preparation of realistic social behavior despite a variable proportion of preparatory miscalculations. (102)

Dimple's sinister imagination and insane behavior exposes her fragmented personality. She does not belong to the world of reality, so far removed from the real world is she! Dimple indulges in sexual fantasies with cricket stars, cabinet ministers and heroes from novels. Conditioned by the commercials in TV and magazines, she fails to identify the world of reality and the struggle between her fantasy world and the reality of her circumstances engulfs her mind and she is caught in a whirlwind of emotions. Critic S.Indira observes,

She believes that she is free and suffering. But this freedom is meaningless as hers is an insane mind and cannot recognize it. She is now more a prisoner of the subjective self than ever before as she has subjected herself to a mindless oblivion. (60)

Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* has a marked similarity with many other Indian novels in English, especially in the killing of the husbands by their wives. It is the tragic inevitability of the protagonists whose personalities have been gradually disintegrating. For Dimple, the various forms of freedom suggested by the media and her actual powerlessness create a tension that afflicts her with an unabated sense of frustration and anger. She often escapes into her world of fantasy. Dimple is unable to understand Amit, the earnest young man she married because she is living in her fantasy world of advertising all along. The only plus she sees in him is his emigration status, which feeds her craving for affluence in her fantasy world. S.P.Swain suggests, "She is awfully conscious of her being relatively ugly. All this is due to her hysterical obsession with the fantasies of advertisements, rather a kind of pop fantasy." (84). The lack of communication between Amit and herself disintegrates her sensibility. She has nightmares of violence, sensations and fear of being raped and killed in her flat. The visions and dreams highlight her rather bizzare state of mind,

That night she had a new dream. She was walking on the beach. A crowd had just gathered ahead. Something strange had been washed up on the beach. A whale, a porpoise, a shark, she heard people say. She fought her way through a crowd that suddenly disappeared. At her feet lay Ina Mullick, in Dimple's sari, a thin line of water spilling from her mouth. (Mukherjee, 103)

Even her romantic notions become weird at one point of time in her life. Sleep becomes a fearsome symbol of death, leading to sleeplessness in her, "Insomnia was what she feared most. She thought of sleeping bodies as corpses" (Mukherjee, 97). She becomes dreadfully affected by imaginary dangers. Apprehensive of premonitions, she loses her link with reality, "Premonitions should be accompanied by courage and caution; they are cruel in a person whose instincts have been worn down by overuse" (Mukherjee, 156). The thoughts that stray into her mind always remind her "life should have treated her better" (Mukherjee, 156). This disappointment aggravates the fantastical dreams in her psyche, and her unconscious mind spews forth ideas that further work towards deteriorating her mental balance.

He (Amit) did not feed her reveries; he was unreal. She was furious, desperate; she felt sick. It was as if some force was impelling her towards disaster; some monster had overtaken her body, a creature with serpentine curls and heaving bosom that would erupt indiscreetly through one of Dimple's orifices, leaving her, Dimple Basu, splattered like a bug on the living room wall and rug. The cataclysm embarrassed her. (Mukherjee 156)

Her imagination, inflamed by too many hours in front of the TV, pictures what might have been, and alone in the apartment, Dimple collapses in terror. As suggested by Rajeshwar, "Her masochism makes her moribund consciousness look almost transparent. As her need to die increases in intensity, she becomes more and more neurotic and vice versa"(65).

Lack of communication with her husband and fellow beings stifles her voice. The television is the only voice she has been listening to, and that was becoming a voice of madness; "someone whose voice was like ice cubes colliding against glass" (Mukherjee 156). It was becoming hard for her to distinguish between what she had seen on TV and what she had imagined. "Dimple had to agree that she was losing touch with what she saw, and what she thought she saw because she had seen it before on television"(Mukherjee, 185). Dimple is often lost in a world of frenzied imagination, "After Leni removed her cup Dimple kept on pouring –over the tray- till the pregnant bellied tea-pot was empty and Leni and Ina were standing and shaking her, 'Dimple, stop it'"(Mukherjee, 152). Anguished and agonized, she becomes a meaningless wanderer between the world of TV and the world of reality.

Mukherjee has employed Fantasy and Imagination as part of defense mechanism to protect Dimple from the external threat which is failure of marriage, as well as the internal threat of feeling guilty for her actions and abnormal desires. James C. Coleman observes,

Defense- mechanisms appear to protect the self in one or more of the following ways, (a) by denying, distorting or restricting the individual's experience; (b) by reducing emotional or self- involvement; and (c) by counteracting threat or damage. Often, of course, a given defense mechanism may suffer more than one kind of protection. (Coleman 122-123)

With fantasy, Dimple overcomes the frustrations in her life, gratifies her desires and imaginary achievements. She aspires for freedom and entertains movie stars in her dream but feels betrayed by the reality of marriage. She has lived in a world of advertising and "She thought of pre-marital life as a dress rehearsal for actual living" (Mukherjee,3) Marriage has not "provided all the glittery things she had imagined" (Mukherjee, 101) and is disillusioned when her husband is not the embodiment of the virtuous man of her dreams.

Dimple is also a highly sensitive creature, precariously dangling between reason and unreason. Tension prevails between her vibrant love of life and her obsessive fear of death. All her dreams being materialistic in nature, the uphill task of reaching out to the stars becomes an impossibility resulting in frustration in her mind. Unable to locate the source of her misery, she decides upon self-destruction, devises methods of ending her life. AS M.Rajeshwar in his article "Sado-masochism as a literary device: Bharathi Mukherjee's Wife" opines:

getting her head caught in the oven, slicing open her jugular vein, consuming pesticide, getting suffocated in a garbage bag, starving, falling over bread knife, getting her head hit with shovels and finally getting mugged and killed in the laundry room in the basement after midnight.(42)

The id in Dimple is strong enough to blame Amit for her wanting to die and is continuously daydreaming of killing Amit. The diseased psyche of Dimple makes desperate attempts to indulge in wicked acts, extra-marital sex without fussing about ethical considerations but longing for such punishment. Dimple allows herself to be destroyed by her excessive introversion and over-sensitized imagination. She withdraws into her private hell of horrifying visions and agonizing loneliness and she finds it impossible to communicate her fears to a husband who neither bothers nor understands her. Karen Horney, the noted psychologist in her *Neurosis and Human Growth*, has contributed the theory of "basic anxiety" in order to explain the obsessive feeling of being isolated and helpless, "In the process, the bonds with reality weaken, hurling the individual into the abyss of psychosis"(198).

All the protagonists of Mukherjee's novels are not dreamers and visionaries. But they seek this Lavinian shore of fantasy to escape from the harsh realities of life without realizing that they become victims in a web of their own creation. The dreams in which they habitually indulge result in a distempered state of mind and mar the functioning of their lives. K.S.Ramamurthi in *The Canadian Women Novelists in a Multi-Cultural Context* goes a step further to attribute the same on the writers themselves,

The urge to withdraw into their own inner selves is so great in these novelists and their protagonists that the external world of spacio-temporal or spacio-cultural realities is often subsumed by the sea of feeling and sensibility or washed away by the flood of sensations generated by reminiscence, dream and nostalgia. These writers are diviners, sensitive women gifted with a vision and capable of diving deep into the meaning of existence, leaving the order by unreliable circle dance of life, the surface world of social and cultural geography for others to explore. It does not mean they are dreamers and visionaries who seek an escape from the realities of life. They dive deep but never get drowned. (188)

Bharati Mukherjee, by exploring the psyche of Dimple, has portrayed the innocent victim of fantasy – the victimization being self-made and because of her uncontrolled dreams and illusions, resulting in death and destruction. The external world of spacio-temporal or the spacio-cultural realities are subsumed by the susceptibility originated by reminiscences, dreams and fantasies. Mukherjee is not a woman who consents the characters to flee into fantasy but styles them to dive deep not to be drowned but to blossom as diviners ultimately.

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