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Existential Crises in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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In Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* (1975), the protagonist, Dimple Dasgupta has her own expectations of freedom which are suppressed by the outer world. To overcome the adverse conditions in her life, she becomes victimized by her own world of fantasy. The novel traces the enigma of existence, the psychic breakdown of an Indian wife in America. She is neither Indian nor American but a stunned wanderer between these two worlds, trying to attain a distinct identity. In the same way, she keeps shuttling between the imaginary media world and the world of reality. Due to lack of meaning in her life she lives in existential vacuum. She murdered her husband in an attempt to assert her American identity. Dimple always tried to exist in her own hallucinatory world and as such faces psychological imbalance. She is a trouble spirit, hanging in between two worlds and belonging nowhere in the end.

Bharati Mukherjee occupies the familiar privileged position of a well-bred post-colonialist-one who has been born brought up post educated in a Third World Country and has achieved literary repute in the American academia. Her entire corpus is replete with uneasy troubled stories about expatriates, their alienation and loss of identity. Bharati Mukherjee also brings feminist perspective to the immigrant experience. Her skilfully drawn novels and short stories are poignant renderings of her women characters quest for their own existence. She tends to depict in her novels, the psychological traumas of frustrated protagonists, who find it difficult to adapt oneself according to outer environment.

Mukherjee probes deeply in the inner conflicts of well educated, sensitive adults whose traditional codes of economy of passion and material desire collapse amid their inadequate comprehension of the American paradigm of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Mukherjee shows the diaspora Indian as living in between two cultures, constantly journeying into new meanings and fashioning new identities. There is a constant tug-of-war between ones inner self and outer environment for existence.

Everybody is aware of ones being and becoming self. A few of them have dare to make own vital choices with freedom in present society. Strong men transcend the tyrannical discipline of dull society and create their own values. They commit themselves to a cause in their effort to change society and are able to overcome life's complexities while weak men make vain efforts to escape from them. They lived in fantasy because they not able to face the harsh reality of the outer surrounding. For them 'becoming' self is merely possible in imaginary world. Such is the condition of Dimple in *Wife*, who faces severe anxiety due to conflict between real and imaginary world of existence. She faces frustration of non-existence in outer environment. She encounters alienation and its consequences in severe terms on migrated land.

In existential view, human beings are in hurry to obtain material comforts offered by modern technology or migration to foreign land for economic purposes, where they do not choose but conform and follow, which cause non-existence and denial of true self. They faces a situation, according to Frankl called as "existential vacuum." Dimple in *Wife* conform to her ideal world and in search of true self and betterment of life, she migrated with her husband which leads

her to severe problems in her life which reaches her to maladjustment and develops abnormal tendencies in her behaviour. As displacement and dislocation often leads to a sense of nowhereness and identity crisis. The reality of life and its path is harsh and one should choose the deceptive path to overcome it which later causes alienation, frustration and existential anxiety.

The characters in Bharati Mukherjee's novels are haunted by some value and their persona could be defined in terms of lack of being. This lack can also be understood as their desire for freedom. In *Wife* (1975), the protagonist, Dimple Dasgupta has her own expectations of freedom which are suppressed by the outer world. To overcome the adverse conditions in her life, she becomes victimized by her own world of fantasy.

Dimple Dasgupta, the female protagonist, was trapped in patriarchal traditional norms since childhood. Where women are hardly permitted to talk of liberation and equality. One should be supervised by a male candidate throughout life; before marriage her father and after marriage her husband. It is essentialized that a girl between the ages of eighteen and twenty, only thinks of marriage. Dimple is not a strong character to rebel against patriarchal psyche so she often wanders in her world of dreams. She has framed her own ideal world in fantasy to pacify her senses. She is conscious of her own free individuality but due to lack of proper channel she has submitted her desires before male chauvinistic society outwardly but inwardly she has chosen another path—to roam in imaginary world to complete her unfulfilled desires, aspirations. The fight between her outer and imaginary world continues when she migrated on foreign land but the consequences are severe on alien land which leads her to existential neurosis.

At the beginning of the novel, she is just waiting for her prince charming—a neurosurgeon—to sweep her off her feet, so that he could “have a different kind of life—an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon sarees.” Her parents are busy hunting for the eligible groom; “her father still circled ads for the ideal boy;” but Dimple gets impatient and feels that twenty years of her life have been wasted. This gave “her eyes a watchful squint and her spine a slight curve.” (qtd in Nityanandam 74) Influenced by the film glosses that she reads, she believes in the need for physical charms to trap to a prospective groom:

She worried that she was ugly, worried about her star shaped body and rudimentary breasts. Would the now-inevitable engineer... be disappointed that she wasn't bosomy and fair like a Bombay starlet? She thought of breasts as having destinies of their own, running marriages or making fortunes. (4)

She wrote to well-known magazines asking for beauty tips. Her ideas and tastes are fashioned only by glamour world of films and advertisements.

Dimple has nothing to do except thinking about marriage because she thinks that marriage is a blessing in disguise. It will bring her freedom, fortune and perfect happiness: Marriage would bring her freedom, Cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love. (3)

Dimple “thought of premarital life as a dress rehearsal for actual living. Years of waiting had already made her nervous, unnaturally prone to colds, coughs and headaches” (Kumar 43). Nothing pleases her more than the imagination about marrying a fellow who provides her all creature-comforts.

At the same time, owing to her traditional upbringing, she imagines herself as “Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legends” (Hermit 3). Her arranged marriage with Amit Kumar Basu, a

Consultant Engineer, filled her with full of enthusiasm and excitement about life and her expectations. Dimple has always lived in a fantastic world, a world which is created by herself. But when she confronts the hard realities of life the feathers of her imagination are clipped. Her romantic dreams of a happy marital life lose their charm as the horrid nature of Basu's flat and surroundings are contrary to her expectations. The gray cotton curtains selected by her mother-in-law indicate the divergent nature of their attitudes to life for she had dreamt of choosing their bedroom colours: "That was supposed to be the best part of getting married: being free and express yourself"(20).

Marriage demands a remolding of Dimple's personality: The renaming demanded by her mother-in-law is a symbolic attempt to wipe out her past and to make her submissive to the will of her husband. She does not like the new name 'Nandini,' while Amit in Shakespearean mode asks what is in a name. For Simple it is everything, the stamp that has given her an identity all these years. In spite of protesting, she finds herself being straight-jacketed into the role of Nandini. Dimple has no choice but to grab the new identity that is thrust on her. Yet after three months of matrimony when Amit unexpectedly discloses that he wanted a tall, slim, convent educated girl fluent in English Dimple is forced to hold back her pain and inferiority complex. Dimple strives to rise up to his expectations by walking straight, dressing wisely and attempting to learn English through books for his disapproval means torture and "all her life she had been trained to please" (28). Dimple thinks that all these problems are temporary and with the confirmation for immigration they will eventually come to an end.

Marriage has not provided all the glittering things she had imagined. Amit does not feed her fantastic life and remains a mere provider of small material comforts. He was not the man Dimple had imagined for her husband. When he is out of the house she starts creating the man of her dreams:

She borrowed a forehead from an aspirinad, the lips, eyes and chin from a bodybuilder and shoulders ad, the stomach and legs from a trousers ad and put the ideal man. (23)

Pregnancy is a boon for Indian women because they are supposed to maintain the continuity of the clan. But Dimple regrets her pregnancy. Her killing of the mice which looked pregnant also suggests that she does not feel at ease with her pregnancy. The act of killing is a manifestation of violence is 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 excited about going abroad, she does "not want to carry any relics from her old life" (42). She thinks that old things will remind her of frustrations and irritation. She wants everything to be nice new. In order to get rid of the vile foetus she begins "eating hot green chilies in the hope that he body would return to its normal cycle" (30). At last she skips her way to self-abortion:

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. (qtd. in Hermit 3)

In view of some critics Dimple's act of abortion "is a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood" (Kumar 46).

When Amit's confirmation for migration to U.S. arrives then Dimple's happiness is inexpressible. She feels like being freed from the brazen fetters of servile domesticity. She wants to migrate on foreign land to secure her own place in this world. Dimple thinks that establishment of her ideal world and freedom from conventions can be possible on new land. The conflict between her imaginary and world can be resolved there. For her "real happiness was just in the movies or in the West" (47). Dimple feels excited and a little scared as well. She has never been to a city bigger than Calcutta and the magnificence of the city of New York terrifies her:

She had never seen such bigness before; the bigness was thrilling and a little scary as well. She could not imagine the kind of people who had conceived it and who controlled it. (qtd. in Kumar 47)

The very first encounter with reality of the alien world discourages the fragile spirit of Dimple. Her attempt to buy cheese with her inadequate exposure and limited English suggests her momentary feeling of adventure. The unpleasant experience with the Jewish merchant thoroughly unsettles her. The incident takes her immediately back to Calcutta where she could buy from anyone: Muslims, Christians or Nepalese. She was used to many races and as far as she had money no one would demand her community. The incident makes her aware of the displacement from home-culture. "The encounter with an alien system is enough to cause a rupture in the consciousness which is prone to incur strong response to minor incidents" (Wadrekar 4). This very first exposure to America leaves a traumatic effect on her mind.

Amit faces frustration due to lack of job which makes him self-centred and insensitive. He becomes more impatient and his confidence starts shaking. While staying in Sen's apartment, Dimple helps Meena Sen in domestic works and spends her time in watching T.V. or reading newspapers. With the passage of time, Dimple starts breaking after the realization that she is deceived in marriage and a good-for-nothing husband like Amit will not cater her dream world. She thinks that her marriage to Amit is a failure of her dreams. All her dreams and about her ideal world, her concrete existence in the world are crumbled on foreign land. In spite of resolution to old problems Dimple encounters with other new problems like nostalgic feeling, language, cultural, religious disparity, etc.

To adapt in new environment Dimple tries to adopt Americaness. Acquaintance with the West results a change in the attitude of the immigrant. With the introduction to Ina Mullick who is "more American than most Americans" (68). Dimple starts measuring herself against the scale of Ina and feels ashamed of her sari-swathed body. Ina familiarizes her with new thoughts and styles of living. The dream of the body of Ina in Dimple's sari at beach suggests her hidden impulses and fear. Encounter with Marsha Glasser Mookerji, Associate Professor of Semitic Studies at Bernard and the American wife of Pronob Mookerji, forces her to reconstruct a new image of the bold, beautiful and binary female in the place of the Indian concept of woman only as beautiful or motherly, never intelligent and friendly.

The dissatisfaction with everything native diffuses to Amit too who collapse inwardly in comparison with T.V. heroes. Uprooted from the solidity of her Bengali home and planked down in hectic, liberal yet impersonal world of American, Dimple travails psychological fragmentation resulting from the clash of cultures and disparity between aspiration and reality. Due to blind follow of American culture she experiences the pangs of rootlessness and existential angst. The old Calcutta habits of eating warmed food and bathing during the middle of the day give way to new habits: "instead seem showered at night, which made her feel different and modern" (113). The rejection of communication with old Calcutta also suggests the distance she has traversed. In her attempt stamp at acculturation there is an unconscious longing for the traditional rituals.

Dimple faces dilemma of two cultures and pulled in two directions. Amit also fails to provide her not only physical comfort but also emotional comfort. Dimple cuts herself away from the reality and become a reticent introvert. Her sense of alienation, frustration cause to insomnia.

The search for own place to live suggests her unconscious desire to have a sense of belonging. Despite a job and house Dimple faces alienation, loneliness which increases her fits of insomnia. The frustration of lonely and dull existence depresses her. She conjures up methods of self-annihilation.

America has outwitted her and now she is gripped by a sense of nostalgia. It is just beyond her understanding “how could she live in a country... where every other women was a stranger, where she felt different, ignorant, exposed to ridicule in the elevator?” (112). Her whole world is limited to the four-walls of the apartment and media becomes her only friend. She feels like writing to Pixie but drops the idea because she thinks:

Friendship was impossible through letters. Conveying New York, Ina Mullick, her nightmares. The “phase” (as Amit called it) she was going through—all impossible to talk about...(qtd. in Kumar 53)

In leisurely hours she tries to dream about Amit but fails to do so because 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)

Dimple’s failure at assimilation with American environment is due to a lack of ‘shared-faith.’ In America, she realizes how easy it was to live, to communicate, to share with people in Calcutta. She never felt frightened at the sight of the policemen whose faces were so friendly, but the scene has change completely in the new environment.

She is scared of self-service elevators, of policemen, of gadgets and appliances. She does not want to wear Western clothes.... She does not want to lose her identity but feels isolated trapped, alienated, marginalised.(18)

Asnani pertinently ascribes Dimple’s mental stake of 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 feminist desire to be assertive and independent and the Indian need to be submissive and self- effacing” (Kumar 54).

When loneliness becomes unbearable Dimple contemplates as many as seven ways of committing suicide. Even her ways of getting rid of life are fanciful like a television advertisement. She cannot trust anybody but media. Linda Sandler accounts for this feeling of ‘emptiness’ as follows:

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 frustration and unhooks her further from reality.... (Kumar 55)

Desperate attempt at enhousement leave Dimple homeless. Thus unrelated to her husband, to the Indian community and the American socity she ends us as a “pitiful immigrant among demanding appliances” (86). Traumatized beyond the point of endurance she murderher husband in what she thinks of as an act of assertion, anotherproof of her ‘slow and misguided Americanization”(Jacob 175).

Thus, Dimple Basu with all her dreams of a liberated wife in America fails as a culture transplant due to various reasons. In America she faces more fear of non-existence and leads her

towards anxiety and frustration. The gulf between expectation and reality, both in the limited domestic space and in the larger cultural space, lack of emotional support and loneliness coupled with neurotic sensibility obstruct her attempts at assimilation. The boundary between the real and imaginary world of Dimple diminished in the end. She remains a stunned wanderer between two worlds, yet is trying to attain a distinct identity of her fantasy. Due to lack of meaning in her life she lives as Frankl's phrase in an "existential vacuum" and other called it an "existential neurosis." Her hallucinatory world of existence ends in the severe anxiety which leads in her to Psychological imbalance.

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