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## Women Empowerment: A Critical Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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Bharati Mukherjee identifies the ways in which women try to adopt themselves in a family situation and the hazards they experience in the society. Their sensitive reactions to situations arising within the family are the main attractions in his novels. The novel "Wife" shows Dimple moving away from reality and trying to find a solution in an illusionary world. In short, she loathes living within the clutches of her husband and in her in laws. The readers are sensitized to the outbursts of controlled emotions exhibited by her while reading the novel. This paper attempts to examine critically the identity crisis suffered by Dimple that emerges due to her immigration to USA .

### Introduction

In the novel, the main female character named Dimple Dasgupta breaks the traditional notion of an Indian wife. She is shown in the novel as a vibrant person but with a sort of mental aberration or apathy. Even while she was unmarried, she nurtured number of fixations such as the nature of husband she is going to have, the manner in which her marriage is going to take place and the kind of married life she is going to lead ...etc. All her dreams and aspirations about her married life get shattered. She suffers from total loss of personality and it culminates into murder of her husband by herself

In the early part of the novel, Dimple gets prepared for her marriage. Here, she is shown as a woman who is quite conscious about her physical appearance. She is very often worried about her lack of physical charm and dark complexion. She employs desperate measures to make herself beautiful. She follows all beauty tips and does physical exercises to appear trim. All these prove to be futile exercises and she develops chest related health problems. This is the first hint seen in the novel about her troubled mind and complicated psyche where lie qualities such as self destruction and murdering tendencies. She is obsessed with desires like beauty and complexion which expedite her marital collapse and breakdown of her senses.

Dimple hopes that her social status would improve after her marriage. Therefore, she wishes to marry a neurosurgeon. She longs for leading an aristocratic life and enjoy all the comforts offered to the upper strata of the society. Without any worry and guilty consciousness, she skips writing her B.A. Degree examinations as her marriage is fixed. She starts spending her time in empty desires and vague imagination. She does not have any idea about married life, its adjustments and complications. Like all wealthy Indian bride, she hopes that :

“marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties in carpeted lawns, fund raising dinners for noble charities.”  
(W 3)

She expects marriage to bring her love. All Indian girls are well trained to languish in their parent’s house until they get married. Here, Enakshi Choudhury observes that :

“Dimple’s position is not different for her very existence, can be described as a waiting to enter into that blessed state of holy matrimony”. (Choudhury 83)

Dimple expects her marriage to bring her abundance of love and freedom. However, S. Indira observes it differently and states that :

“Dimple is not prepared for the consequences that follow marriage. Infact, she is not clear about the concepts of freedom and love. This ambiguity underlying her mental makeup defines the incompleteness of her being.”  
(Indira 71)

Dimple is quite often unsure of taking decisions and setting ambitions in life. This problem is due to her upbringing where her parents took all decisions for her. She is never permitted to do anything on her own. As her parents took all decisions for her, she considered marriage to be an outlet from the gated environment of parental home. The readers will be tempted to call her an escapist who is sorely disappointed in her life. While Dimple wishes to marry a neurosurgeon, her father looks for an engineer to be a prospective life partner for his daughter. He himself is an engineer and hence the preference towards engineer bridegroom. He gives a matrimonial advertisement in a leading newspaper without taking his daughter into confidence. By and large, Indian families are patriarchal in nature and the eldest male member’s decision in the family is final.

In this connect, Kate Millet opines that :

“Traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wives and children, including the powers of physical abuse .... classically, as the head of the family, the father is both begetter and owner in a system in which kinship is a property (Millet 208)

With some effort, Mr. Dasgupta is able to fix the match for his daughter and it happens to be Mr. Amit Kumar Basu. He is an engineer from a middle class background. Dimple has no other option but to consent to her father’s choice. She gives up her ambition of marrying a neurosurgeon and prepares herself mentally for marrying an engineer. This flexible attitude displayed by her portrays the marginal status suffered by Indian women in a male dominant society. Dimple’s married life starts in a cramped apartment. She has no role to play in taking this decision and it is her mother-in-law who selects their place of abode. This happens to be the first incident in shattering her long cherished fantasies and dreams. She is unable to stand

her mother-in-law's dominance. She feels that she has been let down in her married life and is unable to understand that even married life carries its own constraints. She becomes a victim of extreme passions such as indignation, grief, resentment, peevishness, spite and sterile anger due to her mistaken notion that she had been denied freedom in her married life.

Dimple is unable to love her husband because she was not given the freedom of selecting her husband. In the dark recess of her mind, she is in search of an ideal man. This is the resultant of her loveless relations with her husband. Left to herself, her ideal man has

“...a forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips, eyes and chin from a body builder and shoulder ad, the stomach and legs from a trousers ad.” (W 23)

S.P. Swain remarks that the desire of Dimple

“points to her abnormal self-longing for the man of her vision.” But he continues that “it does not prove her hatred for her husband” (Swain 19)

F.A. Inamdar also remarks that :

Dimple does not love her husband. (Inamdar .119)

It is to be understood that Dimple does not have any emotional relationship with him. She neither loves him nor hates him. The problem is that he does not match with her ideal man. The innermost feelings lurking in her deep mind impede her from establishing marital relationship with her husband.

Dimple experiences a hostile reception in her father-in-law's house. The family members of Amit have varied opinion about Dimple. Amit's sister feels that Dimple is not a charming woman whereas his mother frankly admits that she nodded affirmatively to the marriage proposal only to receive a fat dowry. In spite of their opinions about her, Dimple does not care for them and she looks for an opportunity to settle at USA with her husband. She knows very well that her husband is waiting for clearance of immigration papers and it will be only a matter of time for them to settle at USA.

Dimple's best laid plans of leaving to USA receive a serious jolt when she understands that she is pregnant. She is in no mood to carry her pregnancy and forces herself into an abortion. To get herself out of pregnancy, she acts outrageously and

“ gives vicious squeezes to her stomach as if to force a vile thing out of hiding “(W 30)

Dimple considers abortion to a good riddance and wants to get rid of

“the tyrannical and vile thing deposited in her body.” (W 30)

F.A. Inamdar opines that

“Dimple resembles Goneril of King Lear. Goneril wants her body to be blighted with infertility.” (Inamdar 118)

It is very fair to state that Dimple outperformed even Goneril of Shakespeare’s King Lear. Even while vomiting during pregnancy, Dimple thinks about getting rid of the foetus. Shahrukh Husain feels that :

“the bizzare pleasure that Dimple gets in vomiting, enjoying the process and observing the emission with unconcealed satisfaction.” (Husain74)

In short, Billy considers her pregnancy to be a sort of irritant to the wonderful life she has been dreaming for. Dimple’s whole mind is filled up with the desire to abort her foetus. By and large, India is a country where pregnant women are treated with kindness. In this sort of atmosphere. Dimple proves to be a minority. With advancement of allopathic medicine, there are several harmless ways for a woman to get aborted. But, Dimple prefers the most brutal manner possible. She practises skipping for expunging the foetus from her stomach. The manner in which Dimple gets aborted betrays her education and middle class background. The readers will be bewildered for a while to understand from where this savage tendency came up in her mind. It may have originated from aberrant maniacal tendencies or the killer instinct lying dormant in her inner mind. D. Lakshmana Rao opines that :

“her skipping the rope to kill the fetus in her womb, is brought out and activated under the pressure of the new environment.” (Rao 121)

The mental instability inherent in Dimple reaches its worst stage and she starts conjuring up most horrible and disproportionate images about her child. She assumes about delivering a baby with a large head and a thin body. Such imagination makes her fiercely determined to destroy the baby at any cost or else to lose her freedom forever.

All women have rights to decide whether to have a baby or not. There are several dignified methods practiced for aborting a foetus. However, the method employed by Dimple to abort her baby bears ample testimony to her gradually weakening psyche. The mental imbalance suffered by her is seen in all her actions. She has a mindset where trivial issues are given utmost importance whereas bigger issues are ignored at once. For example: aborting her own baby is a serious matter, but she does it without consulting a physician. On the contrary, she wildly chases a mouse for disturbing her day dreams. She kills it by smashing its head. This brutal act makes S.P. Swain opine that :

“the killing of the mouse is to her a symbolic suicide of herself. She has destroyed her own self” (Swain 122)

S. Indira also endorses the same by stating that :

“this incident also hints at the homicidal tendency in Dimple that makes the reader apprehensive.” (Indira 73)

No one is quite sure whether it is suicidal or a homicidal tendency existing in Dimple’s mind. No solid evidence is available to detect short comings in her mental makeup which culminates into the cold-blooded murder of her husband.

The term Dimple means slight surface depression as per Oxford Dictionary. Her name quite reflects the depression existing in her. S. Sujatha comments that:

“her name symbolizes her shallowness.” (Sujatha 41)

The term Dimple also means beauty. To be more precise, it refers to “flawed beauty.” S.P. Swain explains that:

“...depression within her psyche,  
...is borne out by her irritable  
responses to things around her.” (Swain 19)

Dimple used to react in a peevish manner for all things happening to her. She not only lacks beauty, but also suffers from a neurotic lapse, a wanting of sensibility.

Dimple considers going to America so as to escape from the tyranny of her parents and in-laws. She is of the opinion that she would acquire an identity of her own after immigrating to America. Once the couple reach America, they stay along with the Sens. This goes against the ambition of Dimple in having an independent house. It suddenly dawns into her head that she started treating Sen’s apartment as her own.

Dimple develops a sort of arrogance in her attempt to find a new place for their dwelling. These efforts give her a new kind of certainty. The couple shift their abode to the apartment of Marsha Mukherjee knowing that she would be going to India for a month’s holiday. Both Amit and Dimple are the only occupants in the apartment. In Marsha’s absence, Dimple starts wearing her clothes. At least temporarily, Dimple’s dream of staying in an independent house becomes true. The way Dimple uses Marsha’s clothes and lives in her house symbolically indicates that she has sacrificed her individual identity for another.

## Conclusion

Dimple’s numerous attempts to establish an identity for her prove to be a failed mission. She is unable to get rid of the vacuum, the emptiness in her. She frequently hosts dinner for Indian friends in New York. She does it to overcome her passive life. She also takes part in the dinners hosted by the Mullicks, the Sens and other Indians in New York. However, she understands that she cannot sustain these activities for a longer duration. Hence, she expresses her desire to Amit for taking up a job. Being a traditional patriarch, Amit does not relish the idea of his wife working. Dimple continues living in boredom and starts fantasizing again.

The husband Amit is of the opinion that providing material comfort is sufficient enough to keep his wife happy. However, he does not understand the emotional needs of his wife. Even the slightest changes he notices in his wife are only at the surface level.

Dimple longs to be in the company of her family members to overcome loneliness. To get herself liberated much like an American woman, she becomes a neurotic. She fails to notice the difference in what she watches in T.V. and what she experiences in real life. The violent tendency found outside her turns inward and she develops an idea of killing her husband. This idea fascinates 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 T.V. series.( W 195)

She starts living in an illusionary world far against reality. She is unable to find sleep and in a frenzy mood she murders her spouse. She does it without realizing the consequences. She thinks that :

“ Women on T.V. got away with murder.” (W 213)

It is evident from the novel that Dimple was infected with neurosis and the violent atmosphere prevailing in an alien culture aggravated the violence in her. It is very fair to say that if Dimple had stayed in India along with her family , she would have not gone against our tradition and somehow or other she would have learned to cope with her frustrations. Thus the novel *Wife* brings out the disillusionment of Dimple in her married life and the identity crisis suffered by her due to her immigration to USA.

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