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## Search for Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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Bharati Mukherjee is a prominent woman novelist of diasporic Indian literature. The topics of gender, marriage and quest for identity are of prime importance in her novels. Her writings disturb, unsettle and reconfigure cultures, identities and worlds. She has admitted that an issue very important to her is :

“... the finding of a new identity... the painful or exhilarating process of pulling yourself out of the culture that you were born into, and then replanting yourself in another culture” (Mukherjee and Blaise 16).

Mukherjee's protagonists are presented as highly sensitive women with a certain capacity to question accepted social codes, and try to achieve a role and pattern of life that fits their expectations. They refuse to be the ideal pativrata or the passive, docile, self-effacing women and the angels in the house who occupy a secondary position in society and at home. They refuse to be marginalized or constantly cater to the whims of the males in the family. They want to occupy a rightful place as human beings in a civilized society. From the limited sphere of traditionally ordained roles of daughter, wife or mother, they strive for an identity of their own.

This paper aims to study how Bharati Mukherjee deals with an Indian wife's search for identity in her novel *Wife*. She presents a wife's dilemma and loss of identity after marriage. She has presented a very touching real picture of a wife's obstacles and circumstances in life leading to identity crisis, and her efforts in rediscovering of self and inventing a new identity.

*Wife* is a more distant story that sees a young, naive Indian woman named Dimple, trying to reconcile the Bengali ideal of the perfect, passive wife with 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 the young wife in an arranged marriage. Dimple has been suppressed by men and attempts to be the ideal Bengali wife, but out of fear and personal instability, she murders her husband Amit Basu and eventually commits suicide. It is a gender-role related title.

The novel also indicts the traditional Indian system of arranged marriage, which pushes women into oppressive roles in a dominantly patriarchal culture. Dimple's first night after marriage comes to her as a rude awakening when her husband ignores her wishes completely in matter of immigration and then asks her to change her name to Nandini because his mother considers the name Dimple “too frivolous and un-Bengali” (17).

Dimple in *Wife* subverts the model of a good Indian wife, so she refuses to play the role of docile and pleased wife to a dominating husband with unseen Indian confines. Dimple resents her loss of identity, but inwardly she refuses to be diminished. Therefore, she aborts a child to obtain the control of her body and she murders her husband to relieve herself from the old self to begin a new life. Her dangerous abortion to terminate an unwanted pregnancy is not only an assertion of her choice but also an act of rebellion against patriarchal oppression.

Mukherjee indicates the dilemma of the Indian woman whose social role, by tradition, is defined by a patriarchally encoded culture. Marriages are arranged by parents especially the father, then the husband assumes authority over the wife; the wife is expected to subsume her individual and private identity into the patriarchally social and cultural identity. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note, “women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to mere properties (12)”. Dimple is an object whose subjective self conforms to and is confirmed by male ideology and discourse.

Dimple’s story presents the oppressive situation of Indian women from the restraints of the Indian society. Within the frame of Indian traditions, Dimple is trained to obey the patriarchal dogma. At first, she has to accept the love match arranged by her father, and then she needs to play a role of being a good and docile wife in her marriage. Immigrating to America symbolizes her eschewing from Indian society and the restraints. However, in Dimple’s American life, her husband becomes an obstacle when she is looking for a new self. There is a tug of war in Dimple’s mind. She seesaws between India that stands for burden, and America that stands for freedom.

The abortion that Dimple produces is to take revenge on the Basu family and it presents her freedom, on being herself and her triumph of resisting the Basus. Maya Manju Sharma expresses that Dimple’s abortion “is a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood” (15). Dimple takes sovereignty over her body symbolizing that she is her own master. Her murdering of the foetus is the resistance against her arranged marriage; it is like a rebellion to abandon her family bearing of being as good as Sita, the perfect Hindu wife. Her unrealistic expectations of love, freedom and self-realization in marriage are not reconciled with the hard realities of her wedded life with Amit.

Dimple begins to question the values of traditional Indian culture, which sets high ideals for women but treats them as marginal persons in society. Thinking about her own husband’s expectations, she reflects :

“...all her life she had been trained to please. He expected her like Sita, to jump into the fire if necessary (28)”.

Although Dimple continues to behave like a dutiful wife, she feels like an imploding star. She conceives numerous ways to commit suicide : setting fire to her sari, slicing her jugular vein in a warm shower, and inhaling aerosol pesticides are a few of the methods which she imagines. She also conjures fantasies to destroy her symbolic oppressor, her husband Amit. The terrifying freedom offered by America lures her to break loose from the constrictive marriage arranged by her father.

Dimple asserts her sexual independence by having an affair with Milt Glasser. Her transgressions in Marsha’s clothes are her rebellious gestures to assert herself and to break with her cultural past. In a symbolic hallucination scene at the end of the book, she sees herself as a bird in a cage held by Amit. She murders her husband to free herself from her marriage-cage. Her seven stabs to kill Amit are a symbolic repudiation of the seven rounds she took with him around sacrificial fire to solemnize a Hindu marriage. This act is an ultimate gesture of fragmentation and desperation. In fact, Dimple’s powerlessness and helplessness transcend the

boundaries of the new culture to become a sinister reminder of the devastation of women living in an alien, patriarchal world.

*Wife* is Mukherjee's testament for women's liberation and women's right to self-expression and self-determination. She advocates a woman's right to control her sexuality and reproduction to work outside the home, to fight abuse, to express herself, to assert their right to self-determination and to seek self-fulfillment. "Marriage", Dimple believes, "would free her, fill her with passion. Discreet and virgin, she waited for real life to begin (13)". Dimple thought that the best part of marriage was "being free and expressing yourself," but she was in for a rude shock.

She was so much dejected with her life that when an ashtray broke, Dimple "decided it was best to regard the broken ashtray as the end of an era in her own life (148)".

Amit is the traditional Indian husband whose male ego and pride is more important than his wife's dreams and desires. He does not want Dimple to go out and work or become financially independent. When Vinod Khanna offers Dimple the job of a sales girl, Amit reacts :

"One breadwinner in the family is quite enough", looking to Dimple for agreement.

When she smiled, he added, "Besides, Dimple can't add two and two. She would ruin your business in a fortnight (61)".

He publicly declares that his wife is unfit for a job. He doesn't believe in women's liberation and equality of both sexes. In fact, he is the prime cause of the identity crisis in Dimple's life.

According to Amit, female sex cannot be at par with male sex :

"Husbands should not permit their wives to wear pants. A healthy society and mutual respect are based on the clear distinction between the appearance and the functions of the sexes (112)".

He still believed in the superiority of male sex.

Slowly, Dimple's identity is being shattered, detonated by a raw and alien reality. Dimple's desperate and dejected state of mind has been portrayed very artistically by Mukherjee in the following way:

"But he never thought of such things, never thought how hard it was for her to keep quiet and smile though she was falling apart like a very old toy that had been played with, sometimes quite roughly, by children who claimed to love her(212)".

In "*The Yellow Wallpaper*", as Mary A. Hill notes :

"Gilman presents insanity as a form of rebellion, a crucial turning point towards independence(151)".

Dimple's "madness" stems from her resistance to male ideology and to her own and an alien culture from which she forcibly disengages herself. Her descent into madness, in the final analysis, is to be seen as both an affirmation and a denial of her identity as a victim of cultural displacement and patriarchal discourse.

Dimple has no life apart from that of being a wife. She is unable to be an individual. Her loss of identity is due to her self-alienation, her loss of contact with reality :

“The murdering of Amit is an assertion of her American identity. It is almost like a character in a TV series (195)”.

In *Wife*, Mukherjee iterates the marginalization of woman by exploring and exploding ways in which culture and ideology construct feminine identity. By focusing on Dimple’s inner thoughts, feelings and behavioral pattern, Mukherjee shows how the oppressive system of arranged marriage not only deprives a woman of her identity and freedom of choice but also dehumanizes her by treating her as a marketable commodity. She also questions the tyranny of social mores that require a wife to be submissive and self-effacing in order to adapt to the ways of her husband’s extended family.

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