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The Dynamics of Psyche in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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Abstract:

Psychology studies the systematic account of the subtlety and complexities of the human mind, examples of which are accumulated by literature through the centuries. Thus psychology and literature ally with one another. Encouraged by the psychological discoveries of the unconscious on the one hand and observing the oppressive social value system with the trauma it entails, on the other hand, many writers have sporadically depicted the neurotic phenomenon in their fictional works. Out of these writers, Bharati Mukherjee have recurrently dealt with the dark depths of psychosis by creating sensitive characters in their moments of intense mental struggle leading to neurosis. The present paper endeavours to trace the use of 'defense mechanisms' by the characters in Mukherjee's novel *Wife*.

Keywords: Mukherjee, Defense Mechanism, rootlessness, nostalgia

Modernism in Literature calls for a cumulative exploration of the inner dimension of characters as modern age stresses the restless, questing spirit of man. With an increasing dominance of dramatizing the inner world of characters, and narrating the events with objective realism, the modern novel has become an interesting literary exercise. Bharati Mukherjee, an expatriate writer of the recent times, has presented her themes in a different dimension than ever before. Being the writer of the modern times, she has depicted in her fiction the problem faced by Indian and third-world immigrants who attempt to assimilate in North American life-styles. P. S. Sathupati opines:

Using and understanding prose replete with ironic developments and with observations, Mukherjee focuses upon sensitive protagonists who lack a stable sense of personal and cultural identity and are victimized by racism, sexism and other forms of social oppression. (Sathupati 119)

Born in Calcutta on 27th July, 1940 into a Hindu- Bengali family, Bharati Mukherjee is the second of the three daughters of Sudhir Lal Mukherjee and Bina Chatterjee. When Mukherjee was seven, her family moved to England, where her father worked as a chemist until 1951, when the family moved back to India. In 1959 Mukherjee received a B.A. with honours from the University of Calcutta, and in 1961 she received her M.A. in English and Ancient Culture from the University of Baroda. Later that year she moved to the United States to attend the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. There she met Clark Blaise, another writer and after two weeks of dating, they married and had two sons. In the same year Mukherjee earned her M.F.A. and went to receive a PhD in English and Comparative literature from the University of Iowa.

Mukherjee immigrated to Canada with Blaise in 1968, and became a naturalized citizen in 1972. She was a professor at McGill University in Montreal. She claims that racist experiences in Canada prompted her to become a United States citizen in 1980. As she states in *Memoir Days and Night in Calcutta* (1977), co-authored by Blaise, "I had lived as a privileged member of the dominant community in the caste and class conscious society, and I

had lived – was still living – as a despised and discriminated against minority in a race and color conscious society”. (Fields 325)

Bharati Mukherjee considers herself to be an American writer with Bengali-Indian roots. After reading Mukherjee’s work, Amanda Fields comments:

One should consider the complex weaving of influences making up her identity. Her personal and creative experience testifies to the fact that survival skills and adaptations are necessary when one is transplanted into a new cultural environment. Mukherjee’s fiction is well known for its depiction of characters living through immigration and assimilation. (325)

Bharati Mukherjee believes that literature is the expression of a ‘voice’. The voice of the artist expressed through his art. Her novels are the reflection of this voice that occupies a unique place in her aesthetics. She deals with such situations which create crippling sensations and antithetical tensions. She is concerned with characters that strain and struggle for the articulation of their repressed and stunned voice in order to carve out a vision of their life. Bharati Mukherjee has delved deep into the inner psyche of her characters and with the knowledge of the science of psychology, she is able to lay bare the motives and desires of her characters in a convincing manner. Rootlessness and unreal existence are the main concerns of this expatriate novelist who has set out to make a deliberate distortion of Indian womanhood.

Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Wife* (1975) falls into the category of the psychological novel as it presents an intense inner world of neurotic and solipsistic individual. Instead of trying to combine the freedom of the individual with tolerance for fellow beings, Bharati Mukherjee chooses to glorify the alienated individual. Dimple Basu, the protagonist of this novel, is less capable of productively adapting to life in the United States, and disappointed with marriage, and the status which she had been aspiring to achieve all of her life. Dimple is an extremely immature girl who constantly dreams of marriage as she hopes that it would bring her freedom and love. At the same time she is not clear about these concepts. This ambiguity underlying her mental make-up defines the incompleteness of her very being. After an excruciating painful waiting which makes her desperate and suicidal, she is finally married to Amit Kumar Basu, an average middle-class, unimaginative, young engineer who dreams of making a fortune in America and retiring to live a comfortable rich life in Calcutta. But soon after her marriage, she feels cheated as her romantic, adolescent mind cannot grasp the reality that freedom too has certain limitations. She begins to resent her new home, her in-laws and even her husband who doesn’t seem to be capable of helping her to achieve her fantasy-life. At this stage, when she begins to reconstruct her ideal man from faces from magazines, and is unable to identify herself with anyone in the family, the prospect of becoming a mother enrages her. She treats it as an outrage on her body and induces an abortion, disposing of that “tyrannical and vile” thing deposited in her body.

Then Dimple along with her husband goes to America, where her hopes are again shattered. She feels that the temporary joblessness has made Amit collapse inwardly and he has become fragile losing his erstwhile infallible position in the family. She is further shaken by the knowledge that America with all its outward glitter allows Indian wives only to create ‘little Indians’ around them but does not allow them either freedom or fulfilment, as evident in the case of Ina Mullick who, despite her attempts of becoming ‘a total American’, remains a frustrated individual. After this disturbing realization, Dimple sinks into a world of isolation, and was unable to welcome the bright prospect of setting up a new home even after Amit gets a job. After a few pathetic attempts to merge herself into the new culture by

wearing the borrowed outfit of Marsha and by flirting with Milt Glasser, Dimple experiences total estrangement from herself and her surroundings as well. Torn by the conflict between her fantasy world and the reality of her situation, she allows her mind to be totally conditioned by the commercials on T.V. and magazines so much so she loses the ability to distinguish them from the world of reality. Caught in a whirlwind of traumatic emotions, her tradition questioning her outrageous adultery, and her present confused self wishing to become American by any means, Dimple finally kills Amit to suppress her guilty conscience and also to feel very American, almost like a character in a T.V. serial.

Freud had remarked that there is always a return of the repressed. In society, especially in a patriarchal and tradition bound society like India, an individual has his/her identity in close affinity with the duty ascribed to him/her by the society. Alienation is a modern concept for such a close knit society, though gradual disintegration of the family structure, loss of relationships and an ever increasing emphasis on the individual is making the modern Indians more and more self-alienated. This self-alienation due to the individual's inability to assimilate oneself with the others or due to the negative influence of certain painful circumstances in one's life, results in the development of psychological disorders like neurosis and psychosis. Mental illness like neurosis, a result of repression of certain desires and emotions that in turn influences the mind, degenerates and digresses to psychosis that affects the whole personality of the person.

In the character of Dimple, we see that her feelings of adequacy were seriously threatened by the 'adjustive demand', as a result of which her reactions tend to become 'defense-oriented', which primarily aimed at protecting the self from hurt and disorganization. Every individual has the desire of some or the other need which they want to be fulfilled. In Dimple also there was an urge for the need to 'understand and achieve' a meaningful picture of the world around her. In psychology this need is also defined as 'curiosity'. Our need for understanding order and explanation of events in our life tends to make us strive to achieve stability around us. Until this is achieved, we remain in a state of tension and it may result in such acute discomfort that an individual may risk anything in an effort to resolve it. Dimple has lived in a fantasy world of advertising and advice columns because of which the need of curiosity emerged in her. "She thought of pre-marital life as a dress rehearsal for actual living". (Mukherjee, *Wife* 3) She constantly imagined her future husband to be the very embodiment of the virtues of the commercial society. The novelist has expressed her desires in these words:

She borrowed a forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips, eye and chin from the body builder and shoulder ad, the stomach and legs from the trouser ad and put the ideal man by herself in a restaurant on a 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 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. (23)

Delay in marriage had made her very nervous and anxious so when she is married ostensibly to a worthy groom, by Indian standards of marriage, her hopes were definitely soaring high. However, she is disillusioned immediately after the marriage. She does not like the new name Nandani given to her by her mother-in-law, and she finds the apartment very small and unattractive. She was very curious about her marriage, but her need to 'understand and achieve' were not fulfilled as a result of which, we very often see her obsessively measuring

her husband against her ideal man and her life against her dream and finding both of them wanting in many respects and despairing as a result.

Marriage had not “provided all the glittery things she had imagined had not brought her cocktails under canopies skies and three A.M. drives to dingy restaurants where they sold divine kababs rolled in roti.” (101-102) The cumulative effect of all these experiences or rather the lack of them renders her incapable of love, because of which her need for ‘love, belonging and approval’ remains unfulfilled and leaves her a neurotic. In the US also Dimple is left alone with Amit. Lack of job makes him less self assured and more self centred. His own problems partly turn him apathetic towards Dimple piling mental and emotional turmoil on her. Things were becoming difficult day by day. As we see in the novel, Amit is anxious for the job, meanwhile Dimple is planning to buy a queen size bed. She prepares the salad with great care and effort for Amit, but he refuses to taste it. She offers to fix the tie for him as a goodwill gesture, but he turns down her offer. The psychological need for ‘love and belongingness’ are most crucial to healthy personality development and adjustment. The need for close ties with other people continues throughout life and becomes important especially in the times of severe stress or crisis. But with Dimple the case was not so, she longed for love and care from her husband, but he was too engrossed with his job that he couldn’t match up with her desires. As a result of which she stops complaining to him and turns into a reserved introvert.

Another psychological need is of 'self-esteem, worth and identity'. Closely related to feelings of adequacy and social approval is the need to feel good about oneself and worthy of the respect of others. Dimple’s craving for affluence prompts her to finally marry an engineer, but it is not a physical need on her part. It is a psychic one. She is drawn into the fantasies of material comfort and plenitude. As a being she is a woman and her psychic obsessions are about the inadequacies of her figure and complexion. She is awfully conscious of her being relatively ugly, and it is at this point that she craves for self-esteem and worth. Intermeshed with feelings of self-esteem and worth is one's sense of self-identity. The last in this category is the need of 'values, meanings and hope'. The need for values can be explained as need for achieving a meaningful and value aided way of life. Dimple thinks that “marriage would free her, fill her with passion and hence waits discreet and virgin...for real life to begin”. (13) Like every girl Dimple too had many hopes and expectations from marriage and her partner. But she did not meet with her basic needs, eventually which interfered in her life and lead to some stress on her, which became a cause for her frustration and anxiety.

While coping with stress, a person is confronted with two problems, the first is to meet the requirements of the adjustive demand, and the second is to protect the self from psychological damage and disorganization. When the person feels competent to handle a stress situation, his behaviour tends to be “task-oriented”, that is aimed primarily at dealing with the requirement of the adjustive demand. But when his feelings of adequacy are seriously threatened by the adjustive demand, his reactions tend to be “defense-oriented”, that aims primarily at protecting the self from hurt and disorganization. To understand the reality of Dimple’s psyche one has to delve deep into the inner recesses of her mind, and to the intricate stirrings of her feelings. S.P. Swain, a critic states that:

It is the gloomy corridors of her psyche that Mukherjee probes with a keen and penetrating psychological subtlety. Dimple moves from a state of mute resentment to an escalating disgust and intolerance which finally culminates in disaster. (Swain 119)

'Defense- oriented' reactions to stress aimed chiefly at protecting the self from hurt and disorganization. Here we shall focus on certain common 'defense mechanisms' seen in the character of Dimple, which had protected her from both external threats, such as devaluating failures, and internal threats, such as guilt arousing desires and actions. James C. Coleman states that:

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)

As explained previously, 'Fantasy' is a 'defense mechanism', in which frustration is overcome by the imaginary achievement of goals and meetings of needs. In such a case an individual gratifies his frustrated desires by imaginary achievements. Dimple is an escapist lost in her private world of fantasy. In the beginning, at her home in Calcutta, Dimple always dreamt about marrying a neurosurgeon. She even used to day dream. She entertains movie stars in her dream, she walks through fire for love, and because she takes the myth of her culture for literal truths, she feels life is always betraying her. Marriage, which should bring her freedom, cocktail parties, and love, brings her instead a marriage contract with Amit Basu, who lacks the wealth and inclination for high life and passion.

Dimple has lived so long in a fantasy world of advertising and advice columns, that she is emotionally incapable of understanding any other human being. She aspires for freedom and love in marriage. This aim brings her indignation, grief, resentment, peevishness, spite and sterile anger. Dimple is trapped between two cultures, and aspires to a third, imagined world. She has incorporated 'fantasy' as a 'defense- mechanism' in her character to such an extent, that the rebel in her is devising new means and ways to destroy herself. The image of Chimera, the fine breathing female monster with a lion's head, a goat's body and a serpent's tail comes to her mind. The image is a foreshadow of her upcoming actions. She is an alienated being undergoing its after-effects like of 'psychosomatic disorder', 'delinquency', and 'contemplation of suicide'.

From this point the novel turns into a pure psychic study of an abnormal woman. The signs of abnormality in Dimple are quiet obvious. She angers her husband by making fun of his dress, and by spilling curry on his shirt. She goes to the extent of condemning the gifts he brings for her. Her abnormality reaches the climax when she skips her way to 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. (Mukherjee, *Wife* 42)

A sadist as she is, she derives self-satisfaction by harming others. We may interpret this behaviour as a cause of 'repression', which is a 'defense-mechanism', by means of which threatening or painful thoughts and desires are excluded from consciousness. Repression may also help the individual to control dangerous and unacceptable desires, and at the same time it alleviates the anxiety associated with such desires. In Dimple we find this streak of 'repression' as she removes all her painful thoughts from her mind by giving pain and hurt to others.

Another psychic trait which can be easily linked to Dimple is mechanism of 'displacement' where when the objective cannot be easily achieved, one tries to achieve that by a parallel action. 'Displacement', is that trait in which there is a shift of emotion or symbolic meaning from a person, or object towards which it was originally directed to another person or object. It often involves difficult emotions, such as hostility and anxiety. Dimple thinks her pregnancy as a taboo for her, and in order to get herself free from it she kills a mouse because "she hated the invisible mice for disrupting her daydreams – she could not dare borrow features from a rodent." (34) The motif of pregnancy links Dimple and the mouse. She thinks that the mouse "had a strangely swollen body. A very small creature with a fat belly. To Dimple the dead mouse looked pregnant." (35) In killing the mouse she has destroyed her own self, by killing her own child. Another example of 'displacement' can be seen when Dimple contemplates self-destruction. Since Dimple is not sure of the source of her trouble she turns with full force to self-destruction and devises at least ten different ways of ending her life under the central metaphor of her life as a "dying bonfire". She thinks of getting her head caught in the oven, slicing open her jugular vein, consuming pesticide, getting suffocated in a garbage bag, starving, falling on bread knife, getting her head hit with shovels and finally getting mugged and killed in a laundry room in the basement after midnight. Dimple however, does not try out any of these methods, although they are quite expressive of her gradually depleting psychic energy reserves. Her psychic apparatus puts up a self-preservative shield against her return to the inorganic state, as a result of which she opted for 'displacement'.

When a person shows some traces of abnormal behaviour, then we often see that he attempts to prove that his behaviour is rational and justifiable and thus worthy of self and social approval and this kind of defense mechanism is known as 'rationalization'. Behaviours that commonly indicate rationalization are; hunting for reasons to justify one's actions or beliefs, being unable to recognize inconsistencies or contradicting elements, and becoming upset when one's reasons are questioned. Dimple too suffers from this kind of 'defense-mechanism', as in order to prove herself correct she even goes to the extent of killing her own unborn child. It is her obsession with the idea of having everything "nice and new", and when she goes to the US, it is at this point that she decides to get rid of the baby. To her, "the baby was unfinished business". In spite of her planned abortion, Dimple does not consider it to be a murder as she "had not planned it for months or used something flashy – a red hot poker from the kitchen or large sewing scissors." (42) The reason that she gives is that "nobody has consulted her before depositing it in her body." (31) 'Rationalization' is a cause because of which she often finds herself doing things without probing into her conscious will.

'Projection' is yet another defense reaction by means of which others are seen as responsible for one's own shortcomings, mistakes, and misdeeds, as well as for one's unacceptable impulses, thoughts, and desires. Dimple suffers from a terrible angst. The anxiety of living haunts her and she loses her balance of mind. Mentally deranged, she begins to develop nausea for things around her. She blames Amit for their disharmonious marriage, and Amit appears to her a projection of her neurotic self which she wants to annihilate and hence she commits the act of murder. She murders Amit in a fit of neurotic frenzy. She feels herself possessed by some demonic power. Torn by her psychic and emotional tensions, she takes the drastic step of murdering her husband thinking that she cannot bear this sort of life forever. As Dimple says:

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)

She hurts him with the kitchen knife on the plea of protecting herself, because she was uneasy about her extra-marital relationship with Milt Glasser. In a stunning calm and cool manner she takes out the knife from the kitchen drawer and drives it down on the spot near his hairline repeatedly hitting at the same place seven times. Thus she punishes her inattentive husband for his lapses and unceremoniously ends up her disharmonious marital life.

The effect of constant proximity of death begins to severely operate upon her psyche. She finds herself collapsing inwardly, and becomes terribly anxious of imaginary dangers, entertains premonitions and begins to gradually lose touch with reality. To conclude we can say that Mukherjee's novels are representatives of her expatriate sensibility. This alone offers an understanding of the ambivalence present in the psychology of the protagonists. This helps us understand the satiric interludes, the ironic juxtapositions, the shifting point of view of the character and also the final disintegration.

Violence is the key word, a leitmotif in Mukherjee's fiction, and the psychic violence that she thinks is necessary for the transformation of character is often emphasized by an accompanying physical conflict of some sort. Dimple's frenzied killing of her husband is the result of her notion that if circumstances do require such drastic act to win freedom, then it may be resorted to. As Mukherjee says:

We've all been trained to please, trained to be adaptable as wives and that adaptability is working to the women's advantage when we come over as immigrants. For an Indian woman to learn and drive, puts on pants, cash cheques, is a big leap. They are exhilarated by those changes. (Tandon 56)

However, Mukherjee also acknowledges that with such exhilaration come fear, doubts, mistakes and violence, both psychological and physical, especially when one breaks-up under the pressure of expectations and fails to adapt. Mukherjee also shows through her novels that as the feelings of fear and anxiety as well as doubts instigate flurries of actions and activities, and then what are brought over in terms of psychological torment are desperate violent acts.

While reading the novel of Bharati Mukherjee, we notice that here she aims at depicting the psyche of those immigrants, who could not cope with their changed circumstances and gave in to the tension created in the mind between the two socio-culture environments, accompanied with the feelings of rootlessness and nostalgia. As while reading about Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Myles, a critic states:

Bharati Mukherjee believes that good fiction concentrates on the emotional, intellectual and physical responses of a group of characters when they are placed in a situation not routine to them. She felt that psychic violence leave a stronger impact on the mind than physical violence on the body. Therefore, her women characters make interesting psychological studies. There is a continuous urge in her women to build up their fragmented life and to express their affirmation to life. True enough, while they attempt to do so, they appear abnormal in their behaviour but sometimes this is only in a bid to live life on their own terms. (Myles 108-109)

It is from this angle that Bharati Mukherjee has dealt with the psychological supplication and crises in the life of her protagonists.

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