

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 3 [June 2016]

7th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxymrj.com

Conflict between Reality and Fantasy : A Psychological Exploration of Bharathi Mukherjee's *Wife*

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Bharathi Mukherjee is a prolific Indian born, Diasporic Writer. Diaspora means dispersal or scattering of seeds in Greek. In earlier times, the word diaspora was used to point out the Jewish dispersion. Presently it is used to refer to the current trends that portray complex realities and experiences involved in the ordeals of migrating to another country. Diasporic writing occupies a significant position in the present literary scenario, in which Bharathi Mukherjee occupies a special place. *Wife* is her second novel written in the year 1975. Bharati Mukherjee's *wife* is a dramatisation of the latent complexities of a woman's inner space. It reflects not only the female psyche but also portrays the complex ways a woman perceives her conjugal relationship. This particular novel reflects Bharat Mukherjee's viewpoints of a young woman who has unrealistic expectations of life and she suffers because of a conflict between reality and fantasy. The geographical displacements also cause a phobia, misconception, leading to a neurotic conditions..

Dimple represents a phobic personality. There is a clear dichotomy between her mind and body. Analysing the mental processes one identifies dissonance due to conflict in her between expectations and reality which drive her murder her husband. As asserted by Usha Bande in her article, Recasting Dimple in *Wife*, "Inner demands and outer realities as well as liabilities of married life create a conflicting situation" (128) in Dimple

At the very beginning of the novel, Dimple seems to express unrealistic expectations of marriage. Marriage is a bonding and perhaps a lifetime commitment. Her desire and mindset of her ideal husband is unmatched with her father's proposal. Yet with an undecided mind, Dimple enters into her married life, as a "need of the hour" arrangement, rather than a long term commitment, resulting in a bonding.. Also "Marriage" promises many flowery things to her, and not mere child bearing.

”Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father was looking for engineers in matrimonial ads...she fantasised about young men with mushtaches, dressed in spotless white, peering into open skulls. Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love.(3)

One can only agree with D.Lakshman Rao who rightly observes, in his paper titled ‘Bharathi Mukherjee’s *Wife: A Paradigm of the culturally uprooted*’ that “It requires no prophet to see that with such an unrealistic outlook, Dimple is headed for disillusionment and unhappiness”(117-118)

Waiting for the right groom has made Dimple feel insecure. “Years of waiting had already made her nervous, unnaturally prone to colds, coughs, and headaches”(4) Her thoughts are peculiar and always panic stricken. Her physical affectations are symbolic of her psychic disturbances. She becomes a victim of uncalled for mental worries. “She worried that she was ugly, worried about her sitar-shaped body and rudimentary breasts.She grew bitter during the last days of August, especially bitter about relying on others”.(10)

She broods over her physical appearance which is beyond her control. This again is conclusive of her mind in commotion. She seeks external solution to an unresolvable internal problem. Her fantasy of being the most beautiful woman clashes with the reality of her true appearance. She writes to a beautician asking for solutions, for changing her physical appearance. She feels upset of having discussed her problem with a third person and that it would be printed. She cries as a sign of mental weakness.”After she had mailed the letter she wept for three hours. She had mailed the letter to be printed.(11)

Dimple seems never happy in her childhood. She suffers from mental disorders. She begins to hate people. Her notion of familial relationship is distorted. She despises even family togetherness . She is always wrapped in her fantasy world, the reality seems drab and dull to her.

“She hated the family album,hated all those stiff, tiny rectangular moments from the past , yellowing in the corners where father's thumb had glued them decisively to the page(12)

Dimple reacts abnormally to all normal situations. This shows her inner turmoil. A helpless crow depresses her. She did not think a wounded crow, trying to raise itself on one good wing then falling back, could be so depressing.(31) This can be taken as an evidence of disturbance in the mind.

Dimple is married to Amit Basu, an engineer. The marriage is not based on mutual consent. There is a disparity in the expectations from both sides and the reality. Dr.Mallika Arjun Patil writes in her article ‘Bharathi Mukherjee’s *Wife : A post Modernist Novel*’ “The two

marry each other much against each other's wishes for the reason that Amit wanted Meena Sen like fat and tall, fair and fleshy belle, while Dimple wanted to marry someone, a surgeon rich enough to look after her" .(120)

Amit does not seem to match Dimple's conjecture of a husband. In her world of fantasy Dimple imagines her husband to look like a film star. Although she liked the way his hair curled, she did not like his paunch and Dimple feels "there was something destructive in trying to recall his features like that, the sum of the parts did not add up to the whole"(23) Dimple fantasises to be in the company of a film star when Amit is away in the office.

"In those hours that he was away, any face in a magazine was fair game. 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 and herself in a restaurant on Park street or on the side of a pool at a five star hotel(24).

So here it is evident that Dimple always lives in an imaginary realm. Her predicaments become intense on not being able to make true her fantasies. A.K.Vishnu in his paper 'Bharathi Mukherjee's *Wife:A Critique*' comments " Line after line her crude and screen-starlet-syndrome marred feelings are revealed freehandedly.Never for a moment she takes her to be a housewife, and the woman of earth".(206)

Dimple contemplates that marriage would bring her new love and affection from a happy family, but she is unhappy with reality. She is never satisfied with her marriage, because she never knows what brings her real happiness. She is always in her illusionary halo, imagining about film stars, a luxurious life. Dimple is always in a daydream. She hates ordinary people, including her in-laws.

"But she hated all the Basus; her body swelled violently with unwanted hate.In her day-dreams, neurosurgeons gave way to sinister abortionists, men with broken teeth and dirty fingers, who dug into her body in a dark, suburban garage. She was obsessed by those imaginary men"(33)

Dimple lives with her in-laws for a while, always feeling upset and grumbling about things that are never in her control. She gets pregnant, while, Amit gets an opportunity to work in the US . This creates a problem in Dimple's mind, She starts envisioning that a baby might be an impediment in her plan to go abroad.

Dimple suffers from mental stress because she keeps on planning a way to lose her motherhood: to get rid of her baby. This is very contradictory to feminine sensibility. Dimple has a perverse attitude. She develops it as a measure of bracing herself from the insecurity in her, caused due to the gap between reality and fantasy, constantly in war with her emotions, dimple becomes neurotic . She does weird things to herself.

”When she ran out of ideas, she pressed cold compresses on her eyes and thought bitterly that no one had consulted her before depositing it in her body. Or was it her fault? She was probably more fertile than others, and there was that poor village woman rendered roofless because of her infertility. Life was too unjust. In spite of the hot night outside the window, she felt damp and chilly. Even the light bulb fixed at an angle to the wall, the transparent light bulb with its single bright filament sent a chill through her body.(33)

Finally she aborts her baby by playing skipping. Dr.S.Shanthi in her paper “Shattered Diasporal dreams in Bharathi Mukherjee’s *wife* “ writes

“She begins to think of the baby as unfinished business, which would interfere her taking off abroad. She does not want to carry any remembrance of her old life and does not want to lose a chance of showering off herself as an exciting person. She had known that Indian women took evening classes or became librarians. Her pregnancy could wipe out her dream of working so she foolishly induces miscarriage by skipping rope until her legs are numb”.(110)

So in the first phase of the novel Bharathi Mukherjee portrays the expectations of Dimple from her marriage and her new experience of a married life. The expectation does not meet reality, and Dimple is dissatisfied. Amit secures a US visa and the couple fly to the US.

Before leaving to the US, Dimple’s friend Pixie hosts a party for her. Dimple is very happy to meet her friends and feels “ being introduced to happy life and believes that real happiness is just in the movies or in the west” So according to S.Sudha in her paper ‘Dimple’s Discourse on Marriage and Immigration : The Mixed Components Recreating an Individual in Bharathi Mukherjee’s *Wife*’

“Thus Mukherjee leaves a note about the protagonist’s dreams about the dreamland, the US.” (115)

So one can understand that Dimple steps into the US imagining the land would be a fairyland of pleasures.

She fancies that her life in America would be very luxurious and interesting. She would not be reminded of anything Indian. This is in sheer contrast with the reality where even from the beginning, Dimple is not able to Americanise herself to the extent that she cannot even dress like the Americans do , She tells her friend Ina Mullick “ there are somethings I can’t do. Wearing pants is one of them. I couldn’t walk down the street in your pants and sweaters”.(155) She justifies “what’s more normal and graceful than a sari?” (155). Thus her assumption to leave everything Indian, back home is broken by the reality of her clinging to the Indian culture

Dimple and Amit share an apartment with a Bengali family. Jyothi and Meena Sen are Amit's friends, who have been in the US for a long time. They live in a moderately furnished apartment. Dimple expects "apartments in America to resemble the sets in a Raj Kapoor movie; living rooms in which the guests could break into song and dance, winding carpeted staircases, sunken swimming pools, billiards tables, roulette wheels, baby grand pianos, bars and velvet curtains"(64)

Dimple is disgusted with the reality of the small apartment of the Sen's. Ever since the second day she begins to grumble about the Sen's household. As observed by A.K.Vishnu in his paper titled Bharati Mukherjee's Wife : A Critique "Morbid longings, unreal imaginings, foul fantasies become her routine".(206)

Another fantasy was that Amit would get a well- paid, white collared job immediately after reaching the US.. Amit could not place himself soon. Dimple despises him "a man without a job was not a man at all"(102) . Dimple gets frustrated because Amit does not meet her expectations. She goes to the extent of comparing her husband with his friend Jyothi and dreams "it could easily have been Jyothi instead of Amit that she had married since both were of the same caste and both were engineers"(85). One night she even fantasises to be in Jyothi Sen's arms. Finally when she is too upset she contemplates " Life had held out such promises but was so slow to deliver"(104). Jaiwant Dimitri rightly observes in this context that " Lack of job makes him(Amit) less self-assured and more self-centered. His own problems partly turn apathetic towards Dimple's piling mental and emotional turmoil. The gap between the romantic and fanciful Dimple and the matter of fact, down-to- earth realist Amit widens day by day in the US"

Here in New York Amit seemed to have collapsed inwardly, to have grown frail and shabby.(89)She did not trust him anymore, did not trust his high-pitched yes and no which had once seemed oracular, did not trust his white cotton shirt with erect collars. She wanted Amit to be infallible, intractable, godlike, but with boyish charm; wanted him to find a job so that after a decent number of years he could take his savings and retire with her to a three story house in Ballygunje Park.(89)

Dimple expects a rich and carefree married life. When she does not get it, she faces disappointment leading to dissonance. She drifts away from reality into her own fantasy space, not willing to face the real life. Dimple feels frustrated due to the mismatch of her dream married life and her real married life.

Dimple attended many parties in America. Here she gets to befriend many, among whom Ina Mullick gets close to Dimple. Ina Mullick is a typical American who values her freedom. When Ina Mullick and Jyothi Sen compliment her Dimple starts to feel her marriage has failed miserably.

”She was bitter that marriage had betrayed her, had not provided all the glittery things she had imagined, had not brought her cocktails under canopied skies and three A.M drives to dingy restaurants where they sold divine kebabs rolled in roti. She fixed a drink and said she was pretty and that Jyothi had said she was smarter than Ina Mullick, and Ina had said she used to look a lot like Dimple. So many compliments in so short a time; she'd never been complimented in her life before coming to New York because it would have made her egotistical and hard to marry off(102)

Here one can assess the hysterical projection of Dimple's sensitive psyche. Her dreams are an extension of the inner confusions in her mind. Dimple relates to all things in a weird manner. The objects in Meena's house too seem to intimidate her. she feels engaged in wired thoughts and fears. All things around her seem to be symbols of anguish and agony to her. These are basically due to failed fantasy to reality.

Dimple keeps seeing herself through Ina's eyes, and feels ashamed of her sari for having fun on an American Beach. That night she has a new dream. She was walking on the beach. A crowd had gathered just ahead. Something strange has 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.(103)

Meena with descriptions of The Breakfast Nook and The Boudoir, but she didn't care. The Sens living room, especially the blue sofa and the speckled rug had now become hideous to her.(104)

When she was about to throw out the torn petals, she felt guilty, as if she had intended to throw out parts of her own body, so she sneaked the three petals to the Sens bedroom and stored them in the purse where she kept her passport, health certificate and gold jewellery. She thought of the incident as "a narrow escape" though she couldn't be sure from what she had escaped, or how.(105)

Dimple suffers from an anxiety due to discord between her instincts from her fantasy world and the real world outside her. She starts to suffer from insomnia.

Insomnia in a person is a sign of internal turbulence. An overburdened mind does not calm down to sleep. Dimple is under mental pressure. She does not adjust to the American life. Amit, too does not aspire to her expectations. Dimple feels self alienated.

”Insomnia was what she feared most. Between two and four in the morning she thought she heard men putting keys in the front door and roaches scuttling in the closet. In those waking nightmares the men had baby faces and hooded eyes. She lay in bed, afraid to close her

eyes and miss the men treading softly on the wall to wall carpet, lay in bed with her eyes fixed on the ceiling and the sheet drawn up to her chin. from the next room there was only the warm noise of bodies turning in sleep; she envied them their sleep.(97)

Dimple is under tremendous mental strain that she is unable to even articulate her real situation to her husband, Amit.

”She didn't tell him about these imaginary beginnings. She didn't tell him about her immoderate daytime sleeping either. They were unspeakable failings. She had expected pain when she had come to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning and in the sweet structures of that new life had allotted pain a special place. But she had not expected her mind to be strained like this, beyond endurance. (115)

These lines bring out the fear and personal instability in Dimple, caused due to failed expectations or rather over expectations. Due to this she becomes an unstable personality. She believes her life has fallen apart, and gone haywire, even though it was going smooth. Surrounded with everything good around her Dimple is unable to comprehend what she wants. She suffers from a chaotic mind. While she believed immigration would bring her the joy she expected it was like “a star collapsing inwardly(109)

Dimple is always in her dream world, influenced greatly by the American media. She enters into an illicit relationship with an American Milt Glasser, to tide over her lonely and isolated existence in the US. But that too does not offer her any solace in the real life. She plans to kill herself in many ways, but ends up murdering her husband. Thus Dimple always in combat with her reality and fantasy, seeks the release to her vented emotions.

“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 TV series she dreamed up extravagant details: the small parts, the fingers, tonsils, heart and gizzard could be packed in plastic bags House work could be creative and challenging.” . (195)

So Dimple is entwined in her fantasy world for ever. She never faces reality. Linda Sandler sums up the situation accurately when she writes “Dimple suffers from a subterranean streak of violence. She is uprooted from her family and her familiar world is projected into a social vacuum where the media become her surrogate community, her global village. New York intensifies her frustration and unhooks her further from reality; she kills, like a sleep walker”

Initially, the novel received a very harsh response from the readers. It was not accepted. It is a very controversial book. Ms Magazine had a review which said “some books can be allowed to die, others have to be killed”. But later on in the eighties the book was a great success, due to a change in the feminist attitudes. Bharathi Mukherjee assumes herself to be

a “as a very comic writer and that finally in a bizarre way, my stuff is meant to be optimistic. Dimple, if she had remained in Calcutta, would have gone into depression and she would have found a very conventional way out for unhappy Bengali wives- suicide. But in the US, she suddenly lives to ask herself”self” oriented questions. Am I happy” And that to me is progress. So instead of committing suicide, turning the society - mandated violence inward, she, in a misguided act, kills the enemy. So, of course, I am not approving of murder. Its meant to be a postive act. Self assertive”. (75)

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