

Vol. 8, Issue-II (April 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Sr. No. 40]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Manifestation of Western and Indian Cultures in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*: A Critique

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Article History: Submitted-04/04/2017, Revised-19/04/2017, Accepted-21/04/2017, Published-30/04/2017.

Abstract:

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the towering figures in Indian Fiction in English. The crucial theme in her novels is 'identity of the 'self' and cultural conflict'. The present paper analyzes the search for identity of Dimple and the cultural encounter in between Indian and Western Cultures. It also focuses on the mental situation of Dimple and her inner conflict with that of her outward situation. In brief, Bharati Mukherjee very minutely observes the situation of the protagonist, Dimple in relation to cultural conflicts of the two Nations and to that of her 'Self'.

Keywords: Bharati Mukherjee, 'Self', Cultural Conflict, Dimple, Indian Culture, Western Culture.

The Bengali heroine of *Wife* has been named Dimple, which Oxford English Dictionary defines as 'any slight surface depression'. As the novel progresses, Dimple is much more than specifically depressed, for 'she leaves more of a gash than just a dimple' [Levin, Martin: 1975: 17] on the surface of her life. The story is an upsetting account of the conflict between the Western and Indian cultures and the modern and conventional traditions as embodied in the life of Dimple. The East-West cultural conflict is related with some sort of comic ferocity. Dimple is a very brutally drawn character which ends in depression, madness and murder. The murder which is expected to be a self-assertive act, on the part of the author, ends up in a misguided action. Dimple is not a complete woman. Her background of a Bengali college educated girl, suddenly thrown into an alien West, becomes a prisoner of the Ghetto. 'She never left that Flushing area in Queens'. [Connell, Michael, et al: 1990: 24] The essential problem with her character is that of communication, the inability to face up her emotional crack-up. This situation of cultural shock is perhaps a little too trite, for it could also be explained as the agony of a voice and struggle for identity.

Dimple's problem does not lie outside her. She would remain a foreigner wherever she is to go. Her problem lies within her. She suffers from a psychic disorder,

as is clear from her behaviour all along and 'it is difficult to treat the novel as a study of cultural shock for even while in Calcutta, Dimple is an escapist and lost in her private world of fantasy' [Jain, Jasbir: 1985:12-18]. Her dreams are no more related to sexual awareness and how she can step out of the limits imposed by the Sita legend rather than independence or self-realization:

'At no juncture does she posit a world which is more integrated or more free than the one in which she is placed. Her isolation is rooted not merely in loneliness, in isolation or cultural, but her estrangements from her own past and her own inner being.' [17]

The present and the past do not interact in Dimple's life. With her, it is not just her alien environment. Dimple's story is basically a psychological study of an almost abnormal person driven to extreme by her immigrant problem. Her problems with adoption lie far more deeply embedded than the temporary cultural shock diagnosed by her husband. Even while in Calcutta, she is an escapist. Marriage, which is expected to give her total freedom, allow her to enjoy cocktail parties and bestow her love from her husband. But, it proves to be frustrating, for she lacks the wealth and inclination for higher life and passion. She is puzzled that marriage does not bring glamorous freedom and searches for answers in letters to the editor.

To start with, the need for sharing her views, for voicing her inner desires, ambitions and frustrations, is a very ambivalent need. What has gone into the making of her psyche are fantasies of affluence and plentitude which neutralize the actual reality of a middle-class existence. Dimple wants a different kind of life altogether. The craving for affluence is her psychological demand and a direct consequence of her middle class background. The other component is her obsession about the inadequacies of her figure and complexion fed more by fantasies of advertisements. Not satisfied with the advice of beauty experts, she writes to Miss Problemwalla, seeking advice for rectifying an underdeveloped bust. Her husband, though quite handsome, does not quite measure up to the standard of movie stars:

'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 trouser ad and put the ideal man herself in a restaurant on park street or by the side of a pool at a five star hotel.' [23]

These predictable motifs would have made Dimple an average hollow adolescent. But, the trouble is deeper and becomes obvious by her erotic fantasies, shot through with

violence. At night, she hallucinates, sometimes when she enters the bathroom in the dark, the toilet seat twitches like a coiled snake. Tight twisted shapes lunge at her from behind cupboards or try to wrestle her into bed. Dimple is sure, 'marriage would free her, fill her with passion. Discreet and virgin, she waited for real life to begin' [13]. Marriage would only have given her the further edge from muted disturbances. Happy people did not talk to themselves and they did not pretend that they had not been talking to themselves. 'Dimple Basu is a happy woman' [21], she repeats. Things thereafter become more complex with the prospect of pregnancy and now visions of neurosurgeon give place to abortionists. She complains to Amit,

'Why didn't yet tell me to get the loop? Why didn't you arrange it?
Why didn't you get me some pills? Her helplessness enraged her'.
[32]

She has constant flare-ups. Then comes motherhood, which remains an encumbrance to her. She does not wish to carry any relics from her old life.

Dimple expects everything to be brand new. She starts to think of the baby as unfinished business. It clutters up the preparation for going abroad. She thinks of ways of getting rid of the foetus that she describes as 'vile' and 'tyrannical', something deposited in her body without anybody consulting her. Once, she gets the vision of a baby. It has wrinkled skin like a very old man's and a large head filled with water. She whispered to Amit,

'He would have been deformed. I had this bad dream last week, he
had no arms and legs'. [43]

In her mad exuberance, Dimple induces an abortion by violently rope-skipping. Under the passive posture of Amit's wife, there is a considerable accretion of violence. Dimple lives with her fermenting frustrations and puts her faith in the New World. She believes that now a whole new horizon is going to open before her.

The young couple immigrates to New York, and Dimple must adjust to a whole new set of circumstances amid violence, and high rise isolation. Amit, pre-occupied with economic realities, is little comfort. They stay with Jyoti Sen and Meena Sen in Queens where the Indian community has set up its little India. However, no trouble convinces Amit Basu. Jyoti is very happy that Indians abroad are so outgoing and open-minded. They condemn communalism.

Amit also does not entertain the idea of Dimple working for Vinod Khanna whom he distrusts:

'To him, all Punjabis are lecherous, dirty and uncultured' and believes with 'so many Indians around and a television and a child [of Jyoti and Meena with them] a woman should not have any time to get crazy ideas.' [69]

Amit does not like the craze of his wife towards American Television. In her mind only pampered American women have 'break-downs'. He explains that Dimple is going through a culture shock.

Though Dimple comes to the US as the dependent wife of an engineer and is not expected to have any interaction with the new culture by her husband or her community, Television brings American culture to her. She buys the versions of American life what they sell. She tries to lessen the pain of alienation through this activity, but does not conceive of her cultural identity. In this case, her Indianness seems to be 'a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration'. [Mukherjee, Bharati: 1990: 03] Thus, her immigration to America enhances her dependence on the infinitively more intimate television screen and the glossy magazines of more attractive format. They provide her with an alternative to the life she leads as the wife of Amit Basu, an unimaginative Bengali man, though kind and considerable.

Dimple soon finds herself in the situation of despair. She is bitter with her post marriage circumstance. She regrets over her marriage with Amit. She believes that a man without a job is not a man at all. Her reaction is drastic:

'..... between three and four the next morning Dimple thought of seven ways to commit suicide in Queens. The surest way, she felt would be to borrow a can of Drano, from under the kitchen, sink and drink it, diluted slightly with water. She could see herself as a Before and After type T.V. commercial: human face and feet and an S-trap for a body slip a green garbage bag over her head and tie it with a string around the shoulders ... '. [102]

Dimple does not tell Amit about these imaginary beginnings or about her moderate daytime sleeping either. She has –

'expected pain when she had come to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning, and in the new street structure

of that new life had allotted pain a special place. But, she had not anticipated inertia, exhaustion, endless indecisiveness.’ [115]

Sometimes, latter she hears that Meena’s friend has died of burns, perhaps suicide:

‘Setting fire to a sari had been one of the seven types of suicide. Dimple had recently devised’. [115]

Dimple further reflects and cannot bear the thought of Amit prying the details of the suicide out of her. From her suicidal thoughts spring the idea of murdering her husband:

‘That night trapped between the cold wall and Amit’s heavy body, in post-nightmarish lucidity she sought revenge. She began to feel that violence was right, even decent. The darkness was unbearably, exciting, taut with angry premonitions, promises. Her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt, with a viciousness she thought inappropriate to her wisely status, she said [in defiance] I’ll wear any goddamn thing I want to, so there!’ [117]

Dimple is stunned by the incredible violence, she watches on her TV. It becomes a diabolical trap without hope of either release or relief. Even, the apartment objectifies her psychological degradation and degeneration. In her idleness, she dreams of catching fatal diseases, and to her Leukemia is the most glamorous.

The cultural conflict does not adequately account for Dimple’s behaviour. The reason for her being neurotic is not sufficiently elaborated. It is a pathological case:

‘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 easily, like a sleep walker.’ [Linda, Sandler: 1975: 75-76]

While in this neurotic frame of mind, Dimple’s whining and moaning continue, she strikes an illicit relationship with Milt Glasser that entails for her changes on both mental and physical planes. She likes him, trusts him clearly and in his company even the

inhuman maze of New York becomes as safe and simple as any locality in her own Calcutta. To her, he is America. A new change takes place in her routine.

However, she, who conceals her 'guilty adventure' from Amit, devises a way of dealing with it, a way that would have made a mercenary killer blush:

'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'. [195-96]

Thus, violence becomes the inevitable part of her further life. Unlike *The Tiger's Daughter*, Mukherjee in *Wife* accordingly simplifies and sharpens her focus. It appears as she reverses the pilgrimage, journeying from East to West, she confronts personal and social violence head on, and she splits her complex self into facets, creating characters that shatter like glass. Violence is Dimple's fundamental experience of New York. The novelist develops her theme of cultural conflict with complex irony and skill, especially transforming cultural symbols into surreal images of Dimple's madness, where 'television becomes the voice of conscience in her head' [195]. But, Mukherjee makes it clear that television does not make an eagle out of a dove like most people think.

On the whole, Linda Sandler considers the novel as the story of a woman who is trapped in between two cultures, and who aspires to a third, imagined world. Living in her social vacuum, Dimple is not unlike hundreds of American men and women who believe and are betrayed by the promise of fulfillment offered by the media and who choose the solution suggested by a violent environment. She feels that the meaning of 'wife' goes far beyond its title theme and the book carries frightening implications about North American society where violence becomes increasingly ordinary because of no anchoring community. On the whole, the global village, as Mukherjee perceives, 'is a territory where sleep walkers enact subliminal drives' [76].

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