

Transcultural Inertia and Gendered Displacement: Reading Dimple in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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Abstract:

Migration causes layers of displacement, cultural disorientation, and a continuous fight for identity for expatriate women, particularly those from India. Relocating to a new cultural environment after leaving one's home country can be both freeing and limiting. Nonetheless, Indian women who relocate for marriage frequently feel exiled from both their sense of independence and their birthplace. The term 'transcultural inertia' is explored in the study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975) to understand the protagonist Dimple's continued emotional and ideological immobility and her incapacity to overcome cultural differences. It investigates the primary causes of this inertia which includes the following characteristics - psychological and cultural dissonance; silent stagnation and lack of agency; conformity and subjugation in the pursuit of autonomy; and emotional dislocation and fragmented belonging. It explains through critical frameworks such as postcolonial and feminist critiques, as well as Sara Ahmed's theory of affect, particularly her concept of affective economies. Finally, the study considers how a migrant can overcome transcultural inertia in the modern era, where immigrant women's stories indicate a shift towards agency, resilience, and cultural negotiation.

Keywords: Transcultural Inertia, Diaspora, Subjectivity, Displacement, Alienation, Dissonance.

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975) remains a critical text in expatriate literature, exploring the psychological and cultural dissonance of immigrant women who fail to negotiate their identity in a new world. The genesis of *Wife* stems from Mukherjee's own frustration as an Indian settler in Toronto, Canada, with the novel's setting shifted to New York as she later elaborates in her joint nonfiction work co-authored with her husband Clarke Blaise, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, *Wife* is about a Bengali girl between eighteen and twenty-one "whose only available outlet, suicide, is transformed in the madness of emigration to New York into murder" (*Days* 141).

A transcultural context, or transculturality, means unlearning the rigid associations of culture, nationalism, and religious or social ideologies with one's identity. It dismantles the rigid classification of culture as 'social homogenization', 'intercultural delimitation', and 'ethnic consolidation'. Transcultural approach is towards an openness to all cultures, imbibing elements from other cultures to cover up the limitations of inborn culture (Welsch 1 von 16). As Couldry remarks, "Wherever we look, cultural life involves adaptations (often very recent ones) of materials from elsewhere: from music, clothing, and food to images and ideas. 'Local' cultures are everywhere made up, in part, from translocal elements; local culture incorporates 'transculturality' ... if our experiences of culture are increasingly marked by trans-border flows, then the ties of culture to place would seem to be loosened" (Couldry 95). The transcultural approach must aim "to look more deeply into ourselves and to put into practice those forms of understanding, translation, negotiation, and interpolation required by our living among culturally different others" (Dagnino 139).

Wife revolves around the disillusionment of the embodied expatriate protagonist Dimple, who is married to a highly educated engineer from IIT Kharagpur. Her husband

migrates to the United States, driven by the pragmatic goal of financial success, a familiar trope in expatriate narratives. The move comes as sudden information to Dimple that leaves her in utter shock as she has lack of mental preparation. The cultural codes of the country prove incomprehensible to her and her reluctance to affiliate with either the Ballygunje ghetto or the Manhattan enclave reveals not just confusion but a form of cultural stasis. Dimple neither reclaims her traditional identity nor redefines it within a transcultural context.

However, when viewed as a woman, Dimple's identity is torn between the traditionally established idea of a submissive, self-effacing Indian wife and the Western ideal of an assertive, independent wife. Her unwillingness to seek a good facilitator and her lack of knowledge about the host culture led her to rely on the televised version of this newly encountered reality as a source of information. Eventually, she succumbs to both social and cultural strains and becomes a disappointed expatriate. In this, Mukherjee's depiction of Dimple's regression into fantasy and violence thus becomes a metaphor for the dangers of unresolved transcultural tension, as a narrative arc echoed in contemporary immigrant experiences, particularly those constrained by dependent visa statuses.

Aims and Research Gaps

The novel examines the setting as a model of culture in which the ignorance of internal diversity within modern societies, the contribution to exclusion, separatism, and cultural fundamentalism, and the normative flaw of discouraging understanding and mutual exchange are evident. This model relies on the concept of cultures as self-contained entities that either seek dialogue between different cultures. It fails as it observes the cultures as separate spheres, or acknowledges the coexistence of cultures. Also, they reinforce divisions such as ghettoisation and cultural essentialism.

This paper proposes the term “transcultural inertia” to elucidate the struggle of transitioning between inherited cultural frameworks and the demands of a new cultural environment through Dimple’s psychological and cultural conditions. Transculturalism is a concept that implies negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; by contrast, transcultural inertia denotes a state of emotional and ideological paralysis. Dimple becomes psychologically immobilised by being bound to the originating culture and alienated from the independence of Western modernity. She resists transformation despite physical relocation into a transcultural subject or fails to fully occupy Homi K. Bhabha’s third space of hybridity, making her a cautionary figure in the diasporic narrative. In this light, *Wife* may be read not merely as a tale of migration gone wrong, but as a cautionary allegory of transcultural inertia, where the failure to mediate between cultures results in psychological dissolution and narrative tragedy. The present-time cultural reality comprises of a variety of horizontal and vertical interactions of cultures due to globalisation, migration, and communication technologies. What was once considered “foreign” is currently a part of everyday life, and performance for a global audience is authenticity. Dimple is both a caution and a plea to move beyond identity politics rooted in rigid cultural definitions.

Methodology

The study uses an interdisciplinary qualitative approach that integrates sociological comparison, affect theory, Welsch’s Transcultural theory and literary analysis. The study analyses Dimple as a warning example of transcultural inertia through a close reading of Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife*. Changes and continuity in immigrant women’s agency, coping mechanisms, and psychological health over time are highlighted by a comparative diachronic approach.

Silent Stagnation and Absence of Agency

The novel introduces Dimple as the teenage daughter of Dasgupta, an electrical engineer. There was a general strike in Calcutta that halted Dimple's further education that led her to choose the second-best option: marriage. The suitable boy is the choice of every woman, and the endless wait finally ends when she marries Amit Basu, who has an advantage over other grooms as he has applied for immigration to the U.S. Marriage was considered the only source of redemption for a woman in a patriarchal society. "Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father was looking for engineers in the matrimonial ads" (*Wife 3*).

The description of the preparation for marriage in Dimple's house on Rash Behari Avenue vividly depicts the passive participation of a woman. Mr. Dasgupta scans the matrimonial columns and bargains on the phone with "the forced, conspiratorial gaiety" (10) of a desperate man. He even takes a month's leave to find the ideal boy and get her married. Mrs. Dasgupta prescribes "pre-bath mustard oil massages, ground almond and honey packs, ping-pong, homeopathic pills and prayers to Lord Shiva, the Divine Husband" (5).

In Sara Ahmed's "Affective Economies", emotions are considered social constructs and not internal psychological states: "... emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments" (119). These emotions are the source of creating boundaries between her and others in the community. Despite Amit's family's unfavourable remarks about Dimple—commenting that her complexion was darker than in the photographs shown and that she was not their first choice—along with the persuasive words of Mr. Dasgupta, who insisted she would be a pleasant choice, Dimple believed that marriage was her trail to freedom through

cocktail parties and fundraising events for charities. She also assumed that love would naturally follow after marriage.

The anxiety of every woman within the Indian context is depicted aptly in the novel through the long wait for a suitable boy for years, which is described in the novel as “lay like a chill weight in her body, giving her eyes a watchful squint and her spine a slight curve” (*Wife* 3). Dimple was excessively concerned about her “sitar shaped body and rudimentary breasts” (4), and she wrote to “DEAR MISS PROBLEM-WALLA” (10). The pressures society imposes on an Indian woman, driving her to a point of mad desperation, are quite visible here. The psychological pressure is certainly a trigger for Dimple, but the lack of a transcultural view is also evident, as culture is not alive here. A monocultural viewpoint and the stigmas of societal ideas suppress her spirit in fostering openness, and inclusion and lead to a feeling of exclusion. Transculturality is not just a theory that describes but also provides the concept of culture as an operative device that shapes cultures as they are eternal shape shifters.

Conformity and Subjugation for Autonomy

Amit wanted a wife who could mirror patriarchal values within the cage of matrimony, deprived of any independent thought. Docility is the most cherished virtue in such a society, used to suppress women, however it is no longer seen as a positive attribute: “Did Sita humiliate him by refusing to stroll through fire in front of his subjects and friends? Let us carry the torch (excusable pun!) of Sita’s docility!” (*Wife* 27). It refers to how a woman is expected to embody self-abnegation, self-effacement, and sacrifice like Sita who went into exile with Rama for fourteen years with no other choice. A wall hanging in the apartment portrays “a small bonfire and a short, voluptuous Sita hip-deep in pale orange flames” (*Wife* 53), further symbolising Dimple’s subordination to Amit, who, like Rama, is seated on the throne in all his royalty. However, women can no longer be confined to legends in the modern world.

Her life in Amit's three-storied apartment building drives her to madness, as she has little say over her choice of curtains, faces the endlessly swelling demands of a joint family, and suffers from a lack of basic amenities and privacy. The apartment becomes a panopticon, where she is monitored and confined. It even leads her to abort her pregnancy by skipping rope because she rejects the idea of carrying any relic from her old life into the new one she hopes to embrace in the U.S. She viciously squeezes her stomach "to force a vile thing out of hiding" (*Wife* 30) to kill the foetus that "blocked her tubes and pipes" (31), since it had invaded her body without her consent.

These emotions are arising from the collective emotions of hatred and fear circulated through the Indian society she lived in, which later in the novel shows how they are circulated through television and in a foreign country where she does not feel white enough. "...psychoanalysis is a theory of the subject as lacking in the present, then it offers a theory of emotion as economy, as involving relationships of difference and displacement without positive value. That is, emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation" (*Affective Communities* 120). Dimple's hatred towards Amit, who constantly criticises her for her short height and lack of fluency in English, combined with her resentment for her own pregnancy, is symbolically expressed when she hotly chases a pregnant rat that disrupts her daydreams. "And in an outburst of hatred, her body shuddering, her wrist taut with fury, she smashed the top of a small grey head" (*Wife* 35). She appears eerily confident in the perverse act, as if she has transformed into a woman with destructive abnormality. Her decision to abort stems solely from her desire to liberate herself from traditional roles and her struggle to resist changes to her 'sitar-shaped' body. National cultural homogeneity asserts that it is born of isolation, but in reality, it is formed through fusion, contact, and migration. Her abortion is not a rejection of motherhood, but of inherited cultural scripts. Culture serves as a mechanism of control, where

cultural infrastructure denies women space for independent selfhood. Dimple serves as an example of transcultural inertia, where adhering to must-follow cultural ideas is not always benign and emancipatory but is destabilising.

Emotional dislocation and Fragments of Belonging

Dimple and Amit move to America, where they are initially offered a temporary apartment in Queens, New York, by Amit's friend and former IIT Kharagpur roommate, Jyoti Sen. This neighbourhood feels like an extension of the Bengali community in Calcutta, as Dimple finds herself in the company of Bengali expatriates like Meena Sen.

Western feminist discourse is criticised for its Eurocentric creation of a monolithic Third World subject that fails to acknowledge cultural complexities. Jody Mason, in her article "Rearticulating Violence, Place and Gender in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*," claims:

"Mukherjee inserts Ina Mullick into Dimple's life as a challenge to the restrictions of traditional wifhood. ... Ina engagement with Western feminisms is a form of resistance to the confines of traditional Bengali wifhood. Mukherjee, however uses Ina's character to demonstrate the misfit between Western and Third World feminisms. ... neither Ina nor Dimple can find expression through a feminism that forces them to abandon their Indianness"

(Mason)

Dimple and Ina exist at a cultural and social crossroads, navigating their identities as both Indian and American. They do not fit within the framework of industrialised First World patriarchy but are instead shaped by their own specific cultural contexts, as women's subject positions are diverse and multifaceted. The move to America represents different aspirations for Amit and Dimple. Amit's primary goal is financial success, and he remains indifferent to

American culture as he ultimately hopes to return to India to settle in a wealthy Calcutta neighbourhood. He exists on the periphery of American society, adopting only a few survival strategies—such as using corporate buzzwords like “frontier justice, crisis management, relationship, challenging, constructive and confrontation listed neatly in columns”—to communicate effectively with Americans (*Wife* 104). However, he neither absorbs nor contributes to American culture. For Dimple, on the other hand, the move to the U.S. symbolises liberation and freedom, yet Amit’s discouragement stifles her every attempt to integrate into American society fully. However, her interactions with Indian expatriates fail to provide her with the sense of belonging she expected. She finds herself alienated by their rigid, parochial notions, further deepening her disillusionment. Inderpal Grewal, in her interview with *E – International Relations*, says, “There is a huge body of research on this topic, from the questions of sexual assault and the military, to the example you give of the Bush administration justifying the bombing of Afghanistan in order to ‘save’ Afghan women. It is axiomatic that war does not ever ‘protect’; it always and consistently destroys lives (though it invigorates some economic ventures—such as the defence industries, or war profiteering)” (2). Similarly, Dimple sells her dream of liberation through marriage and emigration, just like the Afghan women who were promised agency but received alienation and control.

The feeling of being caught between cultures, neither fully assimilated into one nor able to fully belong to the other, is known as transcultural inertia. When someone struggles to find a meaningful identity or sense of belonging in either their home or host culture, it can lead to a state of stasis. The immigrant struggle trope emerges as Dimple deals with alienation and isolation in a foreign land. As Sara Ahmed states, “Knowing that I am part of this history makes me feel a certain way; it impresses upon me, and creates an impression” (*Cultural Politics* 36). Historical and cultural contexts strongly influence emotions. This conflict shapes Dimple’s experience in America, defining her connection to her Bengali roots and her inability to fully

integrate into American society. According to Sara Ahmed's theory of affective communities, shared emotional experiences are associated with a feeling of belonging. But Dimple does not get the connection she needs from her affective ties with other expatriates. Rather, she experiences emotional estrangement. Her emotional and social paralysis is reinforced by her perception that she cannot overcome the inertia of being an outsider. This perception sustains due to her lack of cultural and emotional belonging. In order to overcome transcultural inertia, one must embrace hybrid identities; develop resilience; and look for support from both personal agency and communities. A more complete and cohesive sense of self can result from striking a dynamic balance between cultures while negotiating the challenges of belonging. Transculturality encourages a focus on shared human experiences and mutual enrichment. Dimple fails because she emphasises culture as a closed system that fears or rejects the foreign, rather than as a dynamic, fluid space open to interaction, negotiation, and exchange.

Psychological and Cultural Dissonance

A single national or ethnic source does not help in deriving cultural identities; instead, multiple cultural contexts influence and form complex identities. Multicultural influences shape the personal development of writers and individuals. Artists cite that literature from Japan and other countries influence their identity. Identity is fluid and multifaceted, and it is dangerous and outdated to assume that nationality can solely define a person's culture. Transculturality allows freedom of self-identification and promotes tolerance, which is missing in Dimple. Initially, she embraces the excitement the shift from the Ballygunge ghetto to the Manhattan Conclave, forming connections with individuals like Leni Anspach, Ina Mullick, and Milt Glasser. However, this enthusiasm quickly fades, and she begins to cling to the violence of America as portrayed on television, allowing it to infiltrate her apartment and mind.

While in the company of these women, Dimple leads a double life—without Amit’s knowledge, she secretly experiments with beef and vodka. She aspires to replace their sofa-bed with a patio like the one owned by Mrs J. Thomas. Nevertheless, her nights remain void of love, as Amit’s mood swings and lacklustre presence diminish her excitement, leaving her emotionally unfulfilled. Dimple becomes increasingly consumed by fear, anxiety, and insomnia, her nights plagued by restlessness and her days filled with illusions and distorted perceptions of reality. Her utter loneliness, coupled with the hyperreality of televised violence, blurs the line between illusion and reality, pushing her to the edge of psychological collapse. This mental and emotional disintegration culminates in a final, irreversible act—she murders her unaccommodating and dispiriting husband with a knife. Jody Mason insightfully observes:

“Her violence toward Amit is a bodily act but it cannot be read in isolation; Mukherjee insists that we also understand the mental processes that preface this act.... Dimple’s mind is not insane one; her body is not an uncontrollable, hysterical one. Murder is a choice for Dimple -- albeit a choice that is exercised in a limited and oppressive space” (Mason).

Her longstanding depression, subjugation, and neglect led her to commit a misdirected act of self-assertion through murder. However, in an Indian socio-cultural context, women’s resistance to oppression has also manifested through self-immolation, making Dimple’s choice of murder an aberration that underscores her complete psychological unravelling. If we analyse the same stance by seeing Dimple as Spivak’s “the (subaltern) woman is not simply silenced. Rather, her silence is re-inscribed as the trace of an absence which derives from constructing the representation of the woman as the object and subject of discourse. The subaltern woman is thus the excess of signification: she is the non-retrievable difference at the intersection between subject and object. The differential definition of subalternity maps the symbolic space (a third space) of this intersection, illustrating the function of the subaltern woman as a

symbolic signifier within hegemonic narratives” (Piu 262). This clearly shows the “epistemic violence” perpetrated through patriarchal structures, leading to the transcultural inertia in Dimple (Piu). An inertia that imploded her when the systems of oppression confines within a single subject. “Where is home? On one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory considered as native place. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day... all this, as mediated by the historically specific every day of social relations” (Brah 192). The concept of home by Brah is critical in Dimple’s notion of home as a future fantasy before marriage with America offering emotional exile and physical coldness. It was opposite to the safety that her identity craved for. Instead of the ‘everyday’ providing her the comfort of belonging and solidarity, it offers her the site of psychological breakdown. Identity work is the ability to transcend culturally and to integrate diverse cultural practices, necessary for both competence and authenticity.

Overcoming Inertia in the Contemporary Era

If these phases are analysed in the context of contemporary America, several key insights could be understood. Firstly, as highlighted in Tasha Agarwal’s article, “Understanding Choices and Decision-making: Dependent Spouses in International Migration,” most H4 visa holders are women due to the gendered nature of H1B visa allotments. Similarly, Dimple migrates to the U.S. as a dependent spouse rather than as an independent individual. Agarwal notes, “Whatever the choice one makes, the women were often engaged in rationalising their choices so as to demonstrate that the choices made are, thereby, independent and not influenced by external pressure or other societal norms” (Agarwal 129). However, the reality is that their choices are limited by social structures.

Dimple's migration, therefore, cannot be rationalised as an informed choice. She initially believes that marriage and migration will bring her happiness, yet her expectations are dictated by traditional gender roles, ultimately leading to disillusionment. The decision to migrate is due to familial and societal expectations rather than personal agency. Agarwal further mentions that "there were a few women who had put in additional effort to navigate through the existing resources available on the internet and other social media sites" (Agarwal 126). Many contemporary H4 visa holders find ways to cope, whether by building new networks, waiting for work opportunities, or engaging with social media. Some even reshape their aspirations to align with their new reality.

However, unlike modern immigrant women who actively seek resources and solutions, Dimple struggles to reconcile her pre-immigration identity with her new reality. She becomes increasingly alienated, unable to form meaningful connections or find a sense of purpose. Lacking the proactive approach of today's immigrant women, she withdraws into isolation and paranoia rather than seeking alternative pathways for self-fulfilment. Expectations for migration are often shaped by family members, online sources, and social media. Dimple, too, constructs expectations based on external sources such as films, magazines, and personal fantasies. However, her experience starkly contrasts with her imagined one, leading to a disconnect between expectation and reality. As Agarwal notes, "When the expected experience of being on a dependent visa, based on information generated through these platforms, varies considerably from that of the actual experience, the reliability and authenticity of such information are often questioned" (Agarwal 126). While contemporary immigrant women seek ways to achieve fulfilment despite these challenges, Dimple fails to adjust. The overwhelming reality of isolation, unemployment, and cultural displacement contributes to her psychological deterioration.

Moreover, immigrant women today face numerous challenges, including the unequal distribution of domestic work, gender inequalities shaped by ethnicity, religion, and cultural beliefs, and the denial of fundamental rights while adapting to a new environment. Language barriers further exacerbate these difficulties, limiting access to information and essential services such as healthcare, employment, and education. These factors contribute to stress, low self-esteem, and social isolation, ultimately affecting psychosocial well-being. The article “Promoting Psychosocial Well-Being and Empowerment of Immigrant Women: A Systematic Review of Interventions” by Patricia Silva and Henrique Pereira highlights the importance of support mechanisms in these situations. The authors state, “In terms of the empowerment components, some interventions that included counselling, health education/psychoeducation, and expressive and cognitive therapies delivered in groups and/or individually showed positive effects in promoting immigrant women’s empowerment” (12). Psychoeducation and cognitive restructuring are effective in improving the adaptation and well-being of immigrant women. These interventions help challenge negative thought patterns and promote a healthier, more adaptive perspective on their circumstances.

If Dimple had access to such healthcare interventions, she might have been able to cope with her situation differently. However, language barriers, deeply ingrained belief systems, and social stigma could have prevented her from seeking or benefiting from such services. It highlights the importance of translation services for cultural and linguistic adaptation, as well as tailored approaches to counselling and expressive therapies. Every immigrant woman’s experience is unique, and a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient. Dimple’s case underscores the need for more accessible and inclusive support structures that acknowledge the diverse challenges faced by immigrant women.

Conclusion

Instead of looking for accurate information, Dimple remains passive and relies on daydreams, media-driven fears, and fantasies. She rejects assimilation because she feels stuck and lacks a sense of purpose or community. She descends into depression because she finds no purpose in her circumstances. Unable to build a support system or have meaningful conversations with Amit, she cuts herself off. However, today's women with H4 visas look into alternative career paths, community networks, and employment opportunities. They also choose to adapt to new roles by finding fulfilment through volunteering, online communities, or education. Despite their difficulties in adjusting and defending their choices, they rationalise the experience of migration in a positive light. To gain emotional support, they turn to friends, family, and online communities.

In the 1975 novel *Wife*, Dimple is an immigrant woman living in a pre-globalised world before digital connectivity and laws supporting immigrant spouses, in contrast to those who currently hold H4 visas. The significant bias in U.S. immigration policies during the 1970s towards primary male visa holders reinforces gender dependency. The current version of the H4 visa, which permits dependent spouses of H1B holders to live in the United States, did not exist. When Dimple arrived, there were no organised support networks or resources available to offer legal assistance or opportunities for social integration. Her fate underscores the importance of continued efforts to support immigrant women in finding agency and alternatives to isolation. Even today women face similar struggles to Dimple, making her story both a product of its time and a cautionary tale for the present.

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