

Reinventing the Self in Bharati Mukherjee's Wife

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ABSTRACT:

In Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife*, a tragedy, from the very beginning Dimple, the protagonist of *Wife* appears as a person who lives in an imaginary world, beyond reality. She dreams of a perfect husband and perfect life but when her dreams remain unfulfilled, she murders her husband and thinks that no one will catch her for murder as she saw in most of the serials. So, *Wife* can be read as tragedy brought in by unfulfilled dreams of an unbalanced personality. Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian –born American novelist and a short-story writer who represented in her writing the cultural changes and variance in the immigrant experience. The stories have disclosed the futility of Western glamorous life and baseless romantic views. Mukherjee's own biographical path covers India, Canada and United States and her novels mainly focus on dislocation, alienation and assimilation in the alien land. She has written eight novels, two collections of short stories such as *Darkness* and *The Middleman*.

Keywords: Identity, Fancy, Americanization, cultural rivalry, Wife, Immigration,

Bharati Mukherjee is a well-known novelist of recent decades. She depicts female psyche, cross-cultural elements and search for identity very well in her novels. In the novel *Wife* the protagonist Dimple is the wife of Amit, a young engineer, and this protagonist has to face many problems in her life. This paper studies Dimple as an individual whose psychological demands and reactions to them governed by her experience of life and her unique individual psyche and how her unfulfilled dreams create a tragedy.

Wife undergoes the traumatic process of acculturation in her search for identity in an alien land and fails in her attempt. This is the plight of Dimple in *Wife*. Indian culture nurtures a feeling among young girls that marriage is their door way to happiness. Parents often give little freedom to their daughters. Hence, they yearn to taste the fruit of freedom after their marriage. Dimple Das Gupta, the protagonist of *Wife*, a girl of a middle class Bengali family, is no exception to this attitude. She has colorful dreams about marriage. She dreams of marrying a neurosurgeon and hopes that

“Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund raising dinners for notable charities. Marriage would bring her love”

We see Dimple as a young women who has an inordinate hurry to get married to her dream man. She appears superficial and fails to impress. All she demands from life is parties, glamour and love. Thus her approach to life is unreal. Dimple's parents were worried about her marriage. Mother helping her in her beauty

and style and the, father searching for an ideal match for her. But hidden from this world is a world of fantasy Dimple has created for herself. Dimple's sole aim in life is marriage. She sets her total self waiting for be miraculous happening, liberating and so: "Discreet and virgin, she waited for real life to begin".

The novel opens with Dimple's girlish fantasy about marriage. She is eager to get married and visions of her prince charming whose amorous advances and glances would drench her with supreme bliss. In Dimple's imagination there is no place for mundane responsibilities, struggle with day-to-day existence like water shortage, electricity failure and adjustment with in-laws. Her husband, Amit an upcoming young man who her parents find suitable for her, fails to feed her fancy. Dimple finds the tedium of marriage a burden. She had not bargained to live in the dark and dingy apartment with her mother-in-law. Dimple cannot see any joy in her married home in Calcutta and longs to go to the U.S. In the U.S. fresh troubles start for her. Amit tries to keep her happy by all possible means despite his own struggle to get a job. The reality of life here is that he cannot devote all his time to his wife as he has to remain out of house for long hours. This leads Dimple to feel that he does not care for her. She used to watch television for hours together. She passes her maximum time in watching the films and the television serials which have murder as a part of their content. Unable to cope with her psyche, one night as Amit comes home from his job, she stabs him on the neck with a kitchen knife and after the horrid act she sits smug, secure in the knowledge that in the television serials the murders are never caught.

Dimple wanted a different kind of life- an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris-so she placed her faith in neurosurgeons and architects. But when she actually faces the man in Amit, all her fantasies are brought down to earth with a thud. Marriage, instead of liberating her lands her into a more complex bondage where she feels imprisoned and stifled. All her desires appear as if smothered.

Within the circle of Indian immigrants too, Dimple finds herself an alien. The Indians in America who have adjusted themselves to the American ways of life make her feel an outsider. In her own community too she fails to relate and experiences rejection. This is evident at Vinod Khanna's party where Dimple feels restless about the food that is prepared. At night after the party, she could not sleep. She starts hating everything in Meena Sen's flat where she is staying temporarily. It is very suggestive that Dimple and Amit do not find a flat of their own. After leaving Sen's apartment, they shift to the flat of Marsha, who is on a long vacation. If Dimple has to live in America she has to live in a borrowed flat and clothes and also culture for that matter. On her first day in the New York apartment she felt like a star collapsing inwardly. She tries to convey her fears and forebodings to Amit but neither does he try to understand her nor is he capable of rising above a mundane understanding. The two do not stay happily owing to their weak economic condition. For four months, Amit does not get a job. She hates Amit as he fails to fulfil her dreams. He is not the man of her dreams. Dejected Dimple leads a lonely life of assisting Meena Sen, watching T.V or reading newspaper. Through media she is

introduced to violence. Added to this she hears about more murder. When she fails to relate to the real world, she tries to relate to the unreal world shown on the T.V. But this provides wrong solutions to the real problems.

Today media, oral tradition, female narratives and perspective provide fresh insight into stereotypical images and help construct new epistemological frameworks, prioritising experience over knowledge. Though questioning of social frameworks is an inbuilt part of growth and has always been there in some form or the other, today it is being highlighted because of social and political ideologies.

She hates American English and American system of life. She indulges in a sense of nostalgia thinking about her peaceful life at Calcutta with her friends. She finds it difficult to share her inmost heart even to her husband. Thus she suffers from abnormality of mind and from the crisis of culture.

The idea of murdering her husband ironically makes Dimple feel very American somehow, almost like a character in T.V serial. And her American frenzy accomplishes her wish. Dimple has not been able to adjust to the familial circumstances. She is alienated from her husband who, as a careerist, is hankering after lucrative jobs. Despair sets in her life. Dimple, who had believed that she would be “free” to experience a life different and distanced from that which she had left behind in India, finds her existence in a nebulous, undefined social space that, paradoxically, reinforces her indigenous cultural moorings: she is most reminded of her “Indian-ness” among the “Americanized Indians” (77). Marginalized by the patriarchy of Indian culture, Dimple is equally at sea in her adopted culture.

The killing of the rat is a savage act, symbolizing her anger, frustration and depression embodying life of a pest. Her destructive tendency is displayed in her killing “a goldfish in a glass bowl”, besides destroying the rat and her own foetus. Dimple is fast losing her hold on her real self. According to Horney, The reaction to the deteriorating process can also be stark. And, considering the formidable danger of self-destructiveness, this reaction is completely adequate as long as one continues to feel a helpless pray to these merciless forces. To give her life a meaning and to save herself from self-hate, Dimple takes recourse to escape. Her favorite pastime is to dream of America. Probably, that country would give her life a meaning and vouchsafe her identity. But even in the U.S.A. She feels unhappy and likes to escape.

Though married to an educated and liberated husband, Dimple is not able to strike a balance between the two juxtaposed words: The one she left behind, the other she comes to live in. Initially, she had inhibitions and taboos of her moribund Bengali life. She always thought marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love. But to Dimple’s dismay, it happened just the opposite of what she had dreamt. She is so much frustrated from life that the words like loyalty, suffering and pain, on her husband’s part, lost the meaning and instead.

She starts fantasizing to murder her husband. She has been already in sick led state of mind ever since she left India but the alienation from her husband, environment and the sham and outward glitter, futility and meaninglessness of American life drive to the fits of psychic depression and ultimate insanity. Her splintered–self finds solution to her problems only in murdering her husband.

Every culture has its own strengths and weaknesses. The immigrants often try to find sync between the native culture and the adopted one. But this has resulted in psychological eccentricities that are alien to both the cultures. Hence the solution to this problem is retaining one’s culture as far as possible even while living on an alien soil.

Due to her abnormal temperament Dimple does not belong to anywhere. She loses her sense of security. Her real self is pushed to the background. Not like the Basu, her in laws, just to keep her identity as a separate and unique being. In the USA she tries never to be Americanized. Instead, she engages herself in search for glory by promoting her Indianess. She always dreams of being some one else personality. Thus, increasingly she becomes a dissociated personality. Ultimately she murders Amit and creates tragedy as a result of her unfulfilled dreams.

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