

Reference to the Mythical Ideal wife *Sita* in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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Abstract

“Diaspora” is an emerging word in any literature of the world. The Diasporic writers mainly talk about the problems and possibilities engendered through the experience of migrancy and diasporic life of the people. Diaspora gains tremendous popularity among the lovers of literature. “Diaspora”, the word was borrowed from the Greek word *diaspeiro* that means scattering or dispersion of the people from their own homeland to the different parts of the world. The Greeks first used the term Diaspora for the movements of the Jews away from their home land. In the present scenario, the term Diaspora is applied to a number of ethnic and racial groups, living in an alien land. Indian Diaspora Bharati Mukherjee's gave different Diasporas from different parts of the world through her novels. Mukherjee's novel *Wife* gives a perfect picture of an ideal wife in the beginning and act of violence at the end of the novel. The novel gives nearly four references to the Mythical Goddess Sita who is considered to be the ideal wife in Hindu Mythology.

Key Words: Sita, Homeland, Mythology, Diaspora, Migrancy, Myth.

INTRODUCTION

Dimple, the protagonist of Mukherjee's *Wife*, has migrated to the United States with her husband Amit. He is an engineer from IIT, Kharagpur. Dimple wants happiness and independence, while her husband has engrossed in amassing money like other immigrant people. Dimple has entered the United States without any mental preparation. This leads her into shocking. She has faced lot of difficulties in comprehending the cultural codes of the alien country. She does not want to prove herself as an immigrant who is living in the United States. She has understood the inadequacies of foreign style of life. Dimple is caught between the cultural difficulties of two worlds. She is also torn between the traditional submissive self-effacing Indian wife and an assertive independent wife given by the West. She has established contact with the host culture finally. She has found a bridge between Indian expatriates and the host culture. But, in the absence of adequate knowledge to encounter the alien reality, she is accessed only to the alternate reality.

The Tiger's Daughter, *Wife* and *Darkness* have occupied a notable place in Mukherjee's life and career. In short, *Wife* belongs to the period of Mukherjee's own life transition from the 'expatriate' to the 'immigrant'. Both *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* are having more similarities. These two novels have used the kinship terms like the daughter of Bengal Tiger. In these novels, Mukherjee has applied omniscient narrative technique which is usually associated with a novice. But they deal with the protagonists who are in search of their own independent voices and real roots. Tara and Dimple are travelling in opposite directions. Tara has returned to Calcutta, her homeland after seven years stay in the United States in order to retrieve her past roots whereas Dimple has migrated to the United States in search of her future and her new roots.

There are some interesting genesis based episodes in Mukherjee's *Wife*. Mukherjee and her husband Clarke Blaise have stayed in Calcutta and collaboratively worked on a non-fiction, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. At that time, a professor from Columbia University has asked Mukherjee, “What do Bengali girls do between the age of eighteen and twenty-one?” (DNC 212). Mukherjee has replied that a Bengali girl has very few options except to get married. As Blaise explains in *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, a young girl “may end up for she cannot refuse to marry with a lout who will not tolerate the slightest deviation from expectancy, or the most pathetic gestures towards self-expression” (DNC 141). *Wife* is about such a girl “whose only available outlet, suicide, is transformed in the madness of emigration to New York into murder” (DNC 141). Mukherjee has incorporated her own frustration as an Indian settler in Canada in the novel. Though the setting of *Wife* is New York in the mind of the novelist, it is probably Toronto.

There are four phases in this novel *Wife*. In the first phase, Dimple is the teenage daughter of Dasgupta who is an electrical engineer. Dimple's mission of getting a degree is postponed due to a general strike in Calcutta. In India, the next alternative for any woman in this situation is marriage. Here the marriage is considered to be a long wait for the most suitable boy for a girl. Dimple's endless wait for a man is fixed with Amit Basu, a mechanical engineer. Amit is not like other grooms, he has an advantage. He has applied for immigration to the United States, Canada and Kenya and ready to go with the first offer.

In the second phase, Dimple has become the wife of Amit Basu. Her joint family life bristles with problems in the family of Basus. The Basus' apartment and its claustrophobic atmosphere with three storied building have stifled her personality. She has gone mad and crazy because of her lack of privacy, lack of freedom even she cannot choose her bedroom curtains' colour by her own, absence of basic amenities and the growing demands of the joint family. She moves by a skipping rope. She does not want to take any relics from this stifling life to the New World. She comes to the United States before things grow worse.

In the third phase, Dimple's life begins in the United States. Jyoti Sen, a former roommate to her husband at IIT, Kharagpur has helped them to stay temporarily in his apartment in Queens, New York. Amit has started his long search for a job. Dimple has spent her days with the company of Meena Sen and other Bengali expatriates in New York. It seems more or less an extension of the Bengali community in Calcutta.

In the fourth phase, Dimple's life has started in Mookerji's apartment in Manhattan. The Mookerjis are on sabbatical leave, so they have sub-let the apartment. Dimple has mingled with people like Milt Glasser, Ina Mullick, and Leni Anspach. She has explored the world outside her apartment with Milt Glasser and Ina Mullick. Though she mingles with them, she eventually feels alone in her apartment in Manhattan. She used to watch television throughout the day and this has become her way of life. Television has brought the American violence into her apartment. She has entertained fear of violence in her real life which causes to suffer from insomnia at night. Dreams and illusions start to haunt her during the day time.

Dimple is unable to differentiate illusion and reality. Amit Basu does not support her when she is suffering with these crises. He has contributed to her miseries instead of allaying her fears. These imagined and experienced miseries have driven her into insanity. In an utter most disturbance, she has murdered her husband with a kitchen knife.

Mukherjee portrays the preparations for Dimple's marriage vividly and also her endless waiting for a suitable suitor at her home at Rash Behari Avenue. Here, Mukherjee has demonstrated the truth that marriage is the only way of redemption for any woman in a patriarchal society in India. In India, the societal orientation for a girl-child has begun early in her life like her waiting long period for her suitable husband because the only big event in a girl's life is none other than marriage. This view is effectively brought by Rani Dharker in her article "Marriage as Purdah: Fictional Rendering of a Social Reality." She says:

Marriage is a sun around which the girl's life rotates . . . the girl learns early that she is a *parayadhan* (another's property), her parents' responsibility till the day she is handed over to her rightful owners . . . Marriage is the ultimate goal of a girl's life hence we witness the popularity of festivals like *Gorwa* in Gujarat and *Hartalika* in Maharashtra where a girl from the age of three starts fasting for a good husband. (Dharker 49)

Woman is a passive participant even in her marriage that is ironic way of life which is told by the novelist. Mukherjee's *Wife* opens with the line "Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father was looking for engineers in the matrimonial ads" (W 3). In the case of marriage, as usual the wishes of the parents only are fulfilled. This is the first one that Dimple has faced in a series of disappointments in her life. Marriage is an event that has been blown out of proportion in Indian society. To set a marriage to a daughter has become an arduous task for the parents. In the opening of the novel, the Dasguptas' endless efforts to seek a suitable boy are portrayed in detail.

Mr. Dasgupta, the father of Dimple, scans the matrimonial columns of papers for an ideal boy for his daughter. He has circled the advertisements and bargains on the phone with "the forced, conspiratorial gaiety" (W 10) of a desperate man. He has checked the horoscopes; he makes preliminary enquiries about dowry requirements and has arranged the bride viewing. He has applied a month's leave from his work for the wedding preparation. Mrs. Dasgupta, Dimple's mother has played the secondary role of goading her husband to expedite the search for a suitable boy. She has assured her daughter that her father will bring her

a perfect and an outstanding husband. The mother prepares almond paste in order to improve her complexion and prescribes, “pre-bath mustard oil massages, ground almond and honey packs, ping-pong, homeopathic pills and prayers to Lord Shiva, the Divine Husband” (W 5). She conveys to her daughter Dimple that she surely makes Dimple a real woman.

Dimple has experienced the agony and anxiety while she is waiting for the most suitable boy. Her long wait has already made her nervous, prone to cold, cough and headache. Her wasted years, “lay like a chill weight in her body, giving her eyes a watchful squint and her spine a slight curve” (W 3). She is worried about her “sitar shaped body and rudimentary breasts” (W 4). She has tried all sorts of therapies which causes her chest pain and end up with her hospitalized condition. The excessive concern about the personal appearance of Dimple is unquestionable because this is a part in the matrimonial transaction.

Dimple has reacted as a typical product of the patriarchal society because of this tradition. She thinks, “Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund raising dinners for notable charities. Marriage would bring her love” (W 3). She has felt that marriage is a doorway to real life so she has strong belief that love will become magically lucid on her wedding day onwards. According to her, premarital life is nothing but a “dress rehearsal for actual living” (W 3). Mukherjee does not give much importance on the evening of Dimple’s marriage. She has portrayed Dimple’s anxieties, her fears, her dreams and erotic fantasies graphically during her marriage time.

Two hitches are having contradicted ideas in the marriage of Dimple. One is Mrs. Basu who objects the name Dimple, she says that the name is “too frivolous and unBengali” (W 14). The other one is the sister-in-law Mrs. Ghose. She feels that Dimple looks darker than in the photograph. Mr. Dasgupta has assured the in-laws that she will never give “a moment’s headache” (W 15). Finally, the in-laws have come to consolation by stating that Dimple is not their first choice. The story progresses on the sequence of supposition and suppression. The premarital illusions of Dimple get shattered one after another after her marriage.

Dimple has changed her part as womanhood to be wifehood. She has come to know that playing the role of typical wife is an arduous task in a joint family. After becoming a wife, a woman is not only expecting care and love from her husband but also from his whole family members. Simultaneously she should be a caregiver and a pleasure-dispenser. The discrepancy between the premarital dreams and the marital realities is understood by Dimple in a short time after her marriage. Dimple’s mother-in-law is insisting her on calling her ‘Nandini’ which represents ‘holy cow.’ Very soon Dimple gets used to the name ‘Nandini.’ Dimple wants to please Amit, so she has started to wear bright colours like reds, oranges and purples.

Mukherjee has beautifully presented Dimple’s vision of Sita, the ideal wife to the Hindu legend, Rama with irony and sarcasm. There are almost four references which portray Sita in this novel. The very first reference to Sita is when Dimple is admitted in the hospital for chest pain.

At night she heard a bum victim scream (‘A human torch!’ the nurse said. ‘Would you believe it, she set fire to herself’), and she envied that woman. In Dimple’s dreams, she became Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legends, who had walked through fire at her husband’s request. Such pain, such loyalty, seemed reserved for married women. (W 6)

Sita has a trial by fire at the behest of her husband is a mythical image that is a declaration and ultimate proof of her ‘chastity’ besides the vital trait of a good wife who is devoted to her husband. By eliciting this image, Mukherjee has interrogated the notion of ‘chastity’ which is governing the life of a woman but not because of a man in a patriarchal system in the society.

The second reference to Sita is in the form of a reader’s response to an editorial titled “Divorce-Delhi-style.”

Are you forgetting the unforgettable Sita of legends? Can you not recall how she walked through fire to please Ram, her kingly husband? 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! (W 27)

This reference has mainly focused on ‘docility,’ which is another cherished virtue of an Indian wife. Dimple’s father, Dasgupta has told the in-laws that Dimple is “sweet and docile” (W 14). ‘Docility’ in woman’s part is no longer viewed as a positive attribute but ‘docility’ is considered and promoted as an essential feminine virtue to suppress her in the patriarchal society.

When Dimple has departed to the United States, Pixie has hosted a farewell party to Dimple and Amit. In that party, Pixie has introduced Dimple to a film celebrity known as Ratna Das. Ratna Das takes Dimple as an authoritative woman with a deep voice. She ironically remarks that she is matched with a short, bald and nincompoop of a husband. Ratna Das is forcefully arguing about migrating to the United States when she says, “It might be fun to go for a vacation . . . But I wouldn’t want to settle there” (W 46). Pixie has also felt the same. Dimple thinks:

Ratna Das would not walk through fire for anybody. Ratna Das was modern and intelligent; perhaps you could not be modern and intelligent and still be heroic. You had to choose between being Sita of the rounded hips who could saunter through fire or being Ratna Das who was, at that very moment, smiling tolerantly at the heavy man and patting his hairless cheeks. (W 47)

The mythical character, Sita here stands for sacrifice, self-abnegation and self-effacement. She is the role model for Indian women for emulation. A woman who is migrating with her husband is very much like mythical Sita who is going into the forest with Rama for a fourteen-year period. The likes and dislikes of a woman are sacrificed in her devotion to her husband. Sita has found no choice but she follows Rama.

The fourth reference to Sita is in the Sens’ apartment:

Through the open door behind Meena Sen’s head was a framed batik wall hanging: King Ram and his court in splendid array, and off to the left, in the background, fighting for attention with the trees, mountains, monkeys and holy men, a small bonfire and a short, voluptuous Sita hip-deep in pale orange flames. (W 53)

The entry into the New World of Dimple is initiated with the role model of Sita. The contrast is quite evident that King Ram is seated on the throne in all regality while Sita is immersed in hip deep orange flames. Sita’s virtual subordination to Ram is quite evident. Mukherjee uses high language while referring to the mythical character Sita and gives a disparaging description: “Sita of the rounded hips” (W 47) or the “voluptuous Sita hip-deep in pale orange flames” (W 61). It is obvious that Mukherjee introduces mythical Sita as a narrative device. In her article “Rereading Indian Womanhood: A Note on the Narrative Structure of *Wife*,” Meera Manvi says:

The narrative structure of *Wife* is conceptualized through Mukherjee’s evocation of the Sita Myth at strategic moments in the narrative; the examination of the myth is further strengthened by the opposition that is successfully manipulated between passive resistance/violence, female desire/male authority, enclosure/freedom, marriage as bond/female eroticism, reality/after dream, love/marriage. (Meera 141)

Mukherjee demonstrates the fact that a modern Indian woman can no longer be lapped up in legends except Sita, the legend.

CONCLUSION

A woman’s immigrant experience is fully different from that of a man’s experience. An immigrant woman’s journey is based on search of love, happiness, and independence. She is better suited for adapting different culture because of her ‘other’ in her own culture. She has experienced the concept of ‘dislocation’ and ‘relocation’ in her own culture as a woman. An immigrant woman is displaced at every moment in her personal life’s journey. At first, she has stayed in her parents’ place, she is relocated in her in-laws’ place after her marriage with a man, at her old age, she is a refugee in her children’s place. Dimple here is such an inherent; she has built adaptability and has the exposure to dislocation in her life in India. She has stumbled a lot in the United States with violence.

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