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## Identity Crisis in Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* : An Analytical Study

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### Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* narrates the tale of a young woman forced to emigrate to the United States following her marriage. What follows from this displacement of the self is a complete breakdown of the protagonist's mind and heart, who relapses into madness and turns into a murderess. Bharati Mukherjee is an American writer who was born in Calcutta, India and travelled to Europe, America, and Canada, where she spent most of her life. Mukherjee brings to her novels and short stories the multicultural viewpoint she has acquired through her own experience of living in three continents. The protagonist of *Wife* is an Indian woman who finds herself in an unknown country which is entirely hostile towards her. However, what distinguishes Dimple from other women is the violence that breaks out of her, which is both a result and a reflection of the violence of such a cultural displacement. Dimple's identity undergoes a great shift from that of a young bride who dreams of a fulfilling life with her spouse to that of a madwoman who is driven to murder her husband. This research paper is a study into the cultural dislocation and changing identities which are an integral concern in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*. It also explores the singularity of Mukherjee's female protagonists who are remarkably distinct from those depicted in other diaspora novels.

**Keywords:** diaspora, love, freedom, foreign, cultural displacement, identity, madness

### Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee is an award-winning novelist who is known for her bold female protagonists who dare to challenge the established order of society. Whether it is Jyoti in *Jasmine* or Dimple in *Wife*, both women are rebels to the extent that they commit murder in order to realize their dreams. In *Jasmine*, Jyoti's husband is killed in a bomb attack by a Sikh terrorist. Following her husband's death, Jyoti decides to continue on her journey

through America alone. In order to realize her husband's unfulfilled dream, she forges the necessary documents and travels to America in search of a bright future. However, Jyoti, being a woman with little worldly experience, falls prey to her own exaggerated dreams and passions. Similarly, in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*, Dimple is a naive girl who has nurtured many dreams regarding her marriage. She hopes for freedom and fulfilment in her marital life. Instead, being a naive believer in an idyllic concept of love and freedom, she has remained unaware of the dangerous ambiguity between the concepts of love and freedom in practice. At a certain point in time, Dimple is so overcome by the desperation that she even contemplates suicide. However, she is immediately relieved of these feelings as her marriage is arranged with a middle-class engineer, Amit Kumar Basu. Notwithstanding the flights of fancy of her adolescent mind, Dimple's dreams of an idyllic love and freedom come to nothing in the end.

Bharati Mukherjee, though born in Calcutta, India, spent the rest of her life in America, Canada and Europe. Being a diaspora writer, Mukherjee has had her own trials and tribulations to face. These come to be reflected in the depiction of Dimple Das Gupta's character. Dimple's myriad experiences, like her marriage to Amit Basu, her journey to America, along with her fantasy world of the idiot-box, give the reader a whole picture of diasporic life, including its joys and sorrows, struggles and strife, dreams and realities, as well as its pains and pleasures. This gap between her feelings and her experiences in a foreign land lie at the root of the contradiction of the character of Dimple. This is why Dimple finds herself completely disillusioned and her hopes shattered. Dimple not only journeys from India to America, she also grows up from a young bride with dreams to a disillusioned and disturbed wife on the brink of insanity.

Dimple has such a delicate mind that she cannot withstand the simple misfortune of Amit losing his job for some time. The delicacy of her constitution and the contradiction in her character are incompatible with an American experience. As a result, she chooses to confine herself within the cocoon of her own Indianness, even in America. In fact, all immigrants suffer from a similar condition, like Ina Mullick, who tries her best to adapt to American culture and society but sinks into frustration instead. The same fate awaits Dimple. Dissatisfied with reality, Dimple escapes into her fantasy world, resulting in increasing isolation. Her attempt to assimilate American culture brings her into a close flirtation with Milt Glasser. Glasser becomes a substitute source of her gratification and fulfilment. However, instead of finding fulfilment and satisfaction, Dimple is forced into total estrangement and isolation from herself and society. To escape the reality which surrounds her, Dimple gravitates toward the fantasy world of television and magazines. She becomes nearly incapable of differentiating the world of reality from the world of fantasy. Dimple and Milt Glasser's intimacy initially appears to grant her a new lease of life, but eventually, it becomes a source of heartbreak and conflict. The novel nears a violent end as Dimple's disorientation increases. When Dimple becomes pregnant in India, her desire for American life is so powerful that she desperately tries to get rid of the unwanted baby. She contemplates different accidents which might make her miscarry, like slipping in the bathroom or falling down the staircase.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'Dimple' as 'a slight surface depression'. This symbolizes her essential shallowness. Dimple not only has a shallow character but terrible brutality against everything, including her husband and herself. The idea of abortion and the disposing of the fetus symbolize the violence which will permeate into her marital life. This is magnified further by the ubiquitous violence that Dimple confronts in America. Any discussion of violence appears so routine in American society that it is equivalent to discussing the weather. According to the critic S. Sujata, the problem between Dimple and her husband is one of communication and an inability to come to terms with reality... all that Dimple wants out of life is marriage to a neurosurgeon and the luxury of consumer society. Dimple's life does not turn out as she had hoped. Instead of a neurosurgeon, she must marry Amit, an engineer. However, Dimple sees a golden opportunity in Amit's decision to migrate to America. Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* resembles Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* in many respects, where the hero Oberoi remarks beautifully:

"I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter...? My foreignness lay within me and I could leave myself behind whenever I went?" (*The Foreigner* 143)

Similarly, the problem of our protagonist Dimple Dasgupta does not lie outside but rather within herself. It is clear from the beginning that Dimple is an escapist. She prefers to remain immersed in a realm of fantasy for the most part. She dreams of a groom in marriage who is a neurosurgeon, whereas her father himself is an engineer living in a colony of engineers. She is quite overcome by desperation for marriage. When her university examinations are postponed, her concern is that:

"All the handsome young engineers would be married by the time she got her degree." (*Wife* 10)

Her letter to Miss Problem-Walla speaks thus:

"Need I say that I am desperate, almost suicidal? I see life slimming its doors in my, face. I want to live!" (*Wife* 11)

Dimple suffers from an inferiority complex regarding her beauty. She worries that her complexion is not fair enough or her chest is not fully developed. She tries several remedies like chicken soup, homoeopathic pills, exercises and massages. She believes that it is the face in the photograph which facilitates the marriage of a girl. She dreams of male faces like that of cricket stars, young cabinet ministers and heroes from novels. Bharati Mukherjee writes about Dimple in these words:

"Her heart grew vulnerable and paper-thin, transparent as butterflies' wings. On sunny mornings the sight of boxer shorts hanging out to dry on a neighbor's balcony made her blush. At night she hallucinated. Sometimes when she entered the bath-room in the dark, the toilet seat twitched like a coiled snake." (*Wife* 13)

Sinking into desperation, Dimple indulges in sexual fantasies which she insists are never physical. Ultimately, Mr. Dasgupta finds an ideal groom for her in Amit Kumar Basu. Amit is a consultant engineer who works at a bank in Calcutta. Dimple narrates the whole experience to Pixie; she feels like a young executive in fibre advertisements:

“A lean young man in a business suit, dazzling white teeth, thin mustache. He had asked her what her hobbies were.” (*Wife 15*)

Dimple is torn between her powerlessness in reality and the fantasy of freedom she expected from marriage. So far, Dimple has lived in the fantasy world of advertisements and advice columns. She fails to understand others, including her husband, Amit. Dimple's dreams of the ideal wife Sita in Ramayana with all the humility, sacrifice, responsibility and docility of character she possesses. This vision, however, contains a multiplicity of messages. Breaking away from the traditional category of a wife, Dimple aspires for love and freedom through marriage. In fact, she is caught between two contrary cultural perspectives and aspires for the third one in her world of imagination.

The novels of Bharati Mukherjee astutely explore the themes of identity crisis, transmigration and realization of self. These themes are explored from the perspective of diaspora literature which is marked by strife, struggles and diasporic pains. Bharati Mukherjee's female protagonists are not wooden characters but multi-dimensional figures. Mukherjee explores the multi-dimensionality of her female protagonists in terms of psychoanalysis, depicting the complexity of their minds and mental processes. Through their mindset to persevere, protagonists like Dimple and Jasmine relentlessly strive to realize their dreams. Although born and brought up in the conservative society of India, all these protagonists seek to achieve independence and freedom either in marriage or in their lives after marriage.

On the very first evening after her marriage, Dimple complains to her husband about the limited space in their flat. Amit reassures her that it is a temporary arrangement. Anytime soon, he expected immigration to Kenya, Canada or the U.S. When he asks Dimple about her choice of country, she replies in an ambiguous manner, "I will take whichever one comes through first". Dimple was not very excited at the prospect of moving abroad. Rather, she was somewhat disturbed by the thought of going to a foreign country to live with foreign people different from her native community of Bengali Indians. She laments that she will miss her friends, parents and the country upon moving away from India. This is why she asks Amit if they will go to America forever before leaving for the States. Unlike writers like Kamala Markandya and Anita Desai, who treated the psychology of immigration in terms of conflict, adjustment and affection, Bharati Mukherjee makes her characters bold enough to challenge their situation. Her protagonists challenge their state of 'Alienation' to find their true selves. Encyclopedia Britannica defines 'alienation' in the following words:

In social sciences, the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work, or self. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*)

In the words of Eric and Marry, alienation can be understood in these terms:

“Such feelings of sufferings and alienation rampant in young people, drug addicts, immigrants and psychologically imbalanced women, which is described as, life of quiet depression that marks our age. It is a kind of psychological state that refers to psychological disorder, feelings of rootlessness, loneliness, pessimism, meaninglessness and absence of values and beliefs.” (*Eric and Marry 12*)

Dimple tries to imbibe in her psychology the qualities of the mythical personalities of Savitri and Sita, who are known for their loyalty, dedication and devotion to their husbands. The novel explores and effectively captures the transition of a docile and submissive female protagonist to a disillusioned and unhappy woman on the brink of insanity. Dimple passes through the phase of a young woman in her own land to being an expatriate and an immigrant, experiences which are analogous to Bharati Mukherjee's own life experiences. In *Wife*, Bharati Mukherjee depicts a common dream of the Asian community to settle abroad in the new world of opportunities. The protagonist Tara in Bharati Mukherjee's novel *The Tiger's Daughter* comes back to Calcutta after living in the United States for seven years in search of her past. This is in contrast to Dimple in *Wife*, who goes to America in search of a future. Mukherjee exposes the inhuman face of multiculturalism and its consequences in reality. Her ire is also directed toward American individualism and the dream of success that a naive Dimple believes in. In the beginning of the novel *Wife*, we learn that Dimple Das Gupta has decided to marry a neurosurgeon. This brings the story in momentum, setting Dimple apart from other women, particularly in India, where a woman is merely a cog in the wheel of society. Dimple is ambitious and sees marriage as a passport to material affluence. It will provide her with the freedom, fortune, love and happiness she desires in life: "Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns and fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love." (*Mukherjee 3*)

Bharati Mukherjee bestows Dimple with a complex personality which combines docility of character with an ambition and an instinctive comprehension of her situation that lead her towards a life of frustration and suppressed feelings. In the words of the critic Lynda Sandler, Dimple becomes a victim of the gap between her unmet expectations and the reality available to her, which in turn makes her more violent:

Dimple suffers from a subterranean streak of violence. She is uprooted from her family and 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. (*Sandler 90*)

An analysis of Bharati Mukherjee's fictional work in general and that of her novel *Wife*, in particular, will feature the elements of alienation, the immigrant experience, cultural displacement and the feeling of loss. These are interwoven in tales that depict a conflict between the world of reality and fantasy. The character of Dimple contains all of these key elements of diaspora literature, which transform her from a psychologically immature woman into a human being capable of thinking and feeling strongly about her condition. The feeling of alienation is found everywhere in the writings of Bharati Mukherjee. This is also the case with *Wife*, as argued by C.C. Mishra:

In such a situation where the individual is seen as geographically, culturally, linguistically or sometimes psychologically estranged, the whole question of individual's identity becomes an unattainable ideal. (Mishra 8)

In *Wife*, Mukherjee explores the condition of alienation which is experienced by an Indian wife who accompanies her husband to a foreign continent, where her experience as an immigrant is terrible to the extent that she feels displaced and alienated from herself. Mallik Arjun Patil captures the reason for her alienation succinctly when he says:

Life is really sad when it is lived without an aim, a character and morale. Life does not hold her any promise. (M. Patil 17)

Even before Dimple leaves for the United States, she is very nostalgic and unwilling to go to a foreign land so far away from her own Bengali people. The very idea of immigration turns her into a 'resident alien', who laments the loss of her country, her culture, her parents and her community of friends. In the scene at Pixie's tea party, Dimple feels a sudden panic that she will be going far away from her friends. Bharati Mukherjee describes the scene in these words: "When Dimple and Amit said goodbye to Pixie at the front door, Pixie hugged Dimple and wept... 'It won't be forever, will it?' She asked." Bharati Mukherjee's portrait of Dimple's character bears another feature of the immigrant experience, which is the psychological effect of the feelings of displacement that Dimple suffers from as she shuttles between the psychological and physical boundaries of two distinct cultures. Dimple's personality is constructed around psychological disorientation and violent nature, which lead her to commit the murder of her husband, Amit. Dimple finds herself unable to adjust and assimilate into America's society and culture. When Dimple stays in Queens with Jyoti and Meena, she has an opportunity to make friends with other Punjabi, Gujarati and South Indians living there.

Immigrant psychology defines the character of Dimple, which is given to fancies and daydreams to a great extent. When she arrives in Queens, a friendship develops between Dimple and Milt Glasser, but her husband warns her not to trust Vinod Khanna. Dimple treats the characters of television and magazines as if they are her real friends. This only makes her suffer day and night. Unfortunately, Dimple arrives in America as a woman completely dependent on her engineer husband. Therefore, the reality of American culture does not deliver the

promises it held out to her. This gap between the real state of things and an illusory vision of America delivers a cultural shock which leaves Dimple completely disillusioned. The consequence of this cultural shock is an acute psychological imbalance. Dimple's inability to assimilate this new culture is further compounded by her inherited Bengali identity, which has been thrown into crisis by the many centuries of British colonial rule in India. Dimple is further thrown into confusion by the interaction between two alien cultures, which demands that she must either sacrifice and suffer like Sita or challenge her destiny like Savitri. Dimple's sense of belonging is destabilized. She is brought face to face with two cultures, but she belongs to none of these and finds herself stranded all alone. She searches for an anchor in her aspiration for a third culture which may be above and beyond what America represents.

Dimple's personality alters as she suffers the loss of her mental balance due to her contact with an incomprehensible alien culture. As an outcome of this, she finds herself completely isolated. She loses the little confidence that she had in Calcutta. However, Dimple tries to solve this problem of cultural assimilation by her growing intimacy with Milt Glasser, with whom she falls in love. Despite such attempts, her preoccupation with violence and death persists and makes her out to be a 'complete resident alien.' Only when Dimple is completely alienated from her roots does she begin to develop an acute sense of identity. This makes her conscious of her cultural roots once again. The cover of the novel *Wife* tells its readers, "Dimple, the obedient daughter of middle-class Indian parents, is married to Amit Basu and moves to New York, which leaves her in a state of shock and despair."

Meenakshi Mukherjee makes an acute observation when she comments on Bharati Mukherjee's novel that it is an extreme case of a woman who when transplanted into another culture, loses her identity. This is the reason why 'Dimple's act of violence is unconvincing on a realistic plane, yet really it is an attempt at trying out a mode other than realistic.' (Meenakshi Mukherjee 239). Bharati Mukherjee's work affirms her conviction that immigrants from third-world countries are uprooted from their native cultures and forced to spend all of their time and energy in learning how to assimilate and adjust to the new culture. They gain a new kind of experience from their encounter with this kind of cultural conflict. Dimple's attempts to adjust to life in American society leave her with chaos, boredom and full of distrust for the system altogether. Dimple recedes into the cocoon of her fantasies. She prefers to cut herself off from the hard reality outside, which leaves her unable to reach any kind of compromise or harmony in her consciousness in exile. Jasbir Jain has perfectly articulated this crisis in the character of Dimple:

It is difficult to treat the novel as a study of cultural shock for even life in Calcutta; Dimple is an escapist and lost in her private world of fantasy. (Jain 15)

Therefore, it is very difficult for Dimple to adapt and make herself new according to American etiquette. Whereas Ina Mullick, who is also an immigrant, perfectly adapts and rebuilds herself in accordance with

American values and culture. However, she is not quite comfortable with such an alteration. In her opinion, it has not had any good consequences. It is in this context that Linda Sandler says of Dimple: “She is uprooted from her family and familiar world, and projected into a social vacuum where the media becomes her surrogate community, her global village.” (*Sandler 75*)

As an expatriate in a foreign country, Dimple finds it acutely difficult to acquire the liberal values of the West. This is why she is unhappy, lonely and feels suffocated upon being dislocated from her native place. She is even unable to cultivate a taste for American food, which heightens her sense of isolation and misery. “The stale curry smelled offensively of garlic. It made her feel trapped, isolated in a high-rise full of Americans who ate hamburgers and Pizzas.” (*Wife 119*)

Upon close scrutiny, the character of Dimple reveals the disintegration of a woman's personality. She treats her situation with utter indifference and cultivates no interest in life. The character of Dimple is different from that of Maya. Her search for freedom without any direction and purpose brings her psychological breakdown due to cultural conflict to the center stage, while her identity of an immigrant recedes into the background. In other words, Dimple becomes a powerful character study in disintegration and disorientation. The analysis of the heart, soul and mind of Dimple reveals the psychological processes of her character. The novelist provides us with a powerful spectrum of her habits, personality traits, and behaviour, along with Dimple's likes and dislikes. The real problem with the protagonist is not merely the problem of cultural apartheid and assimilation. Instead, it is the desire to lead a different kind of life replete with lavish comforts that she dreams of. Dimple's marital relationship with her husband is not harmonious enough to allow her to lead a life as a normal wife and a balanced human being. Her life in America is becomes topsy-turvy. As a result of her subsequent depression, Dimple sleeps for most of the day, only waking up to prepare breakfast for her husband and place his clean clothes on the bed. Then, Amit proceeds to crack a few jokes from a book of jokes, out of which he memorizes five jokes a day. These trivial and mundane activities of life take precedence over the serious things that weigh over Dimple, with the result that Dimple frequently begins to contemplate suicide.

The dreams and desires of Dimple before marriage are reflected in her choice of groom. Dimple wanted a groom with a Bollywood personality, tall and handsome with a well-chiselled face. Even after her marriage, when Dimple must face the harsh realities of life, she complains that Amit's flat is very congested, the stairs are unlit, and water must be fetched from below. Having lived in a fantasy world of her own, inspired by television and magazine columns, Dimple suffers from an acute psychological breakdown when brought into violent contact with a hard reality which fulfils none of her dreams. However, what distinguishes *Wife* from other diaspora novels and cultural displacement is its protagonist, who throws an unconventional challenge at the structures that have strangled her desire to live a fuller life.



## Conclusion

What particularly strikes us in the novel are the psychological turbulence and socio-economic upheavals of life that marks the life, choices and conflicts of Dimple Das Gupta. Both cultural and economic reasons that result in the psychological disintegration of Dimple, portrayed skillfully by the author, come to define the thematic pattern of the book. Whether we see Dimple in the company of Amit or Pixie or Amit's family or her friends in America, the central trait of Dimple's personality lingers on as slowness and suppressed to the extent that we, until the end of the story, do not figure out whether the anger and violence reflected off and on the socio-cultural demeanour of Dimple, is meant for her self or for others, including Amit Basu. It is only at the end of the story that the novelist gives the "mature recipe" about the murder of Amit. So, it will not be an exaggeration to say that the central themes of Dimple's character are cultural dislocation and changing identities and she has is not present mentally all the time ( which explains her slowness) but sure psychology, which is covered here and there in the form of geographical details, physical associations, and psychological out-pouring that eventually carries the main thrust of book *Wife*.

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