

Cultural diversity in Bharati Mukherjee's Wife

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Abstract:

One of the key features of twentieth century is the large-scale migration across the globe. Two world wars, emergence of decolonized countries, and the dominance of information technology have redefined concepts such as identity, belonging and home. Diasporic literature, especially Indian Diasporic literature is the result of colonization and decolonization, the period in Indian history in which a large number of Indian people migrated to other countries either through colonization or by their need for work. Diaspora dream figures are found prominently in all the novels of Bharati Mukherjee concentrates many moods of expatriation such as nostalgia, frustration, uncertainty and despondency This study examines how these socio-political experiences are translated into the context of American identity. The protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee's "wife" feels homeless and alienated in the foreign land. She also experience the cultural shock in the new land.

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most prominent Indian women writers in English who is honored as the 'Grande dame' of diasporic Indian English literature. She has been termed as an Asian- American writer, Indo-American writer, Indian Diaspora writer, writer of immigrant fiction and non-fiction, and American writer of mainstream today. As Clark Blaise puts it - "Bharati has become one of America's best known novelists and short-story writers" (Blaise and Mukherjee, "Prologue" to *Days and Nights*, vi). Raj Chetty (2006) opines that American author Bharati Mukherjee could be easily seen as "Lahiri's foremother" (75). Her journey from India to England - India - USA - Canada - USA - made her an expatriate writer like V. S. Naipaul, immigrant writer and American mainstream writer like Bernard Malamud and Henry Roth. She has developed a reputation for exploring the meeting of the Third World and the First World from the perspective of an immigrant to the North America, Canada and USA.

T.S.Eliot in his treatise 'Notes Towards the Definition of Culture says: "Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living" (13). Cross-cultural confrontation has taken a quantum jump with the advent of science and technology. People have started migrated to different countries in orders to achieve their ambition. This trend has developed inter cultural and inter racial awareness. Every culture has its own strength and weakness. The immigrants often try to find sync between the native culture and the adopted one. 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 alien soil.

In the present world of globalization, portraying cross cultural crisis has become one of the significant themes of contemporary writers. Bharati Mukherjee belongs to this category of writers. Being an immigrant she was caught between the conflicting cultures in her attempt to find an identity of her own. This is best reflected in her novels. She effectively depicts in her works this tendency of the American society as experienced by immigrants in American. In an interview with the Times of India, she says:

We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lives in newly independent or emerging countries... when we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity,

we suddenly must absorb two hundred years of American history and learn to adapt to American society... I attempt to illustrate this in my novels and short stories.(Oct,1989)

Mukherjee's heroines pass through the phases of expatriate uncertainty, immigrant confidence and finally acquire the transnational hybrid identity of the world citizen. This process of shifting identities poses dilemma of identity on different levels. In the wake of Globalization people have been moving around across borders as a matter of fact. The cultural collisions and encounters are now a day-to-day reality. It is here that this kind of study and its conclusions would add to the knowledge and perception of people giving them insights into the phenomenon of immigration.

Over the last few decades there has been a mass exodus of women from India to the West for different reasons. It has resulted in a new expatriate sensibility because of multiple dislocations and expatriate writing has been able to transform the stereotype of the suffering woman to an aggressive or independent one. The migratory female subject gets involved in an act of sustained self-removal from her native culture, balanced by a conscious resistance to total inclusion in the new host society. She is caught between cultures and this feeling of *in-betweenness* or being juxtaposed poses before her a challenge to maintain a balance between her affiliations. The trauma of displacement and dislocations result in a new narrative of identity and new discourse of female expatriation.

Bharati Mukherjee's dislocations and displacements, explains her own life, and had compulsive interest in recording the immigrant experience in her novels. Her experiences in India, Canada and America have left an indelible mark in her sensibility as a person and also as an artist. Mukherjee says in her interview with Chen and Goudie:

I describe myself in terms of ethno-nationality, I'd say I am an American writer of Bengali-Indian origin. In other words, the writer/political activist in me is more obsessed with addressing issues of minority discourse in the U.S. and Canada, the two countries I have lived and worked in over the last thirty odd years [...] At this moment my Calcutta childhood and adolescence offer me intriguing, incompletely -comprehended revelations about my hometown, my family, my place in that community: the kind of revelations that fuel desire to write an autobiography rather than to mythologize an Indian national identity.

Bharati Mukherjee has depicted woman's issues even-mindedly both mentally and physically in her books. They broke the abstract and social standards of the past. They concentrated profound into cognizance of their characters and anticipated different pictures of women and their status in the public eye. They have expounded on women in a changed social point of view. In fiction, a few ladies characters have state of mind of dismissal and invalidation of life while others have an assertion and acknowledgment of existence with a trading off demeanor prompting profound feeling of satisfaction. In this sense, the postmodern Indian women scholars make an example of new study since they have set out to smash the myth of a male commanded social framework. They established a firm framework in the domain of female study in Indian Literature in English. Bharati Mukherjee uncovers diverse pictures of women in her fictions. To comprehend these pictures it is authoritative to reflect over feministic approach reflected in Indian English fictions. America has become the connoisseur of people all over the world. Migration of people to this dreamland has reached a new height. The migrated people find it difficult to adjust with new culture and undergo cultural transformation. In this they lose

the roots of their native culture. Mukherjee' protagonist Dimple of her second novel *Wife* undergoes traumatic process of culture shock in her search for identity in alien culture.

Bharati Mukherjee's most popular novel **Wife** (1975) had attracted number of critical comments. It was written while she was going through her intimidating phase in Canada. One can notice a definite alienation leading to a feeling of dispossession from her depiction of Dimple, the protagonist of the novel. **Wife**, a finalist for the Governor General's Award, deals with the theme of immigration and psychological trauma in the form of loss of identity of Dimple. Mukherjee visited India ten years after her migration to the West. It was by accident that she heard a question. What do Bengali girls do between the age of eighteen and twenty-one? (Days and Nights in Calcutta) This shaped her creative sensibility and the outcome of it was her novel **Wife**. The Bengali heroine of *Wife* has been named Dimple which literally means "any slight surface depression". But as the novel progresses, one would surely understands that she leaves not just slight depression but a deep wound on the surface of her own fate.

The protagonist of the novel who is Dimple, twenty year's old, middle-class Bengali girl and eagerly waiting to be married. She has a romantic disposition towards life, a result of reading novels and film magazines which make her negate the harsh and gruesome realities of life. From the very beginning she is different from other normal girls. She has set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father is looking for engineers in the matrimonial ads. The author has pin-pointed here the dilemma of the Indian woman whose social role, by tradition, is defined by a patriarchal culture. It is the feminine duty of a woman in a male dominated society to subjugate her feelings and desires to the will of her father. Thus she believes that marriage is a blessing in disguise which will bring her freedom, fortune and perfect happiness, things she is too subservient to ask for in her own family: "Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love". (WF 3) Dimple always wishes to live a different kind of life- "an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris" (WF 3). But at the same time, owing to her traditional upbringing, she imagines herself as "Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legends" (WF 6). She thinks that premarital life is some sort of a dress rehearsal for actual life. What pleases her most is imagining about marrying a man who would give her all materialistic comforts. Meanwhile her father finds a suitable boy for her. He is Amit Kumar Basu, a Consultant engineer. He has applied for immigration in Canada and his job application is pending in Kenya. Dimple is excited about her marriage but after marriage her desires remain unfulfilled. Amit's mother is not quite happy with the name 'Dimple' and instead wants to call her 'Nandini'. This aspect of re-christening, although, common in the Hindu tradition, is something which infuriates Dimple. This is the first blow she has to suffer on her real identity. She wonders whether the new name would cease her being the person she is. Can a new name change her identity or make her a new person? She does not like the new name given to her by her mother-in-law. She finds the apartment very small, unattractive; the sight of the wounded crow is exceedingly loathsome to her, but at this stage it is a passive resistance only: "it was this passive resistance, this withholding of niggardly affection from Amit, this burying of one's head among dusty, lace doilies that she found so degrading". (WF 30). At this stage, when she begins to reconstruct her 'ideal' man, on the basis of the faces from magazines, and is unable to identify herself with anyone in the family. Slowly she begins to realize that marriage is something not made for her. The imaginary world that she had so carefully and lovingly created begins to shatter into little fragments. At her in-laws she dislikes everything and her sense of dissatisfaction irritates her. Thus comes a shift in her psychology. She dislikes the new name given to her by her mother-in-law. The apartment is horrid and so is the interior decoration of the happiness eludes her mind and she abhors the very idea of being a wife.

Dimple shows signs of dilemma of cultures which is a domino effect of her phobic condition in the end. Two incidents from the novel, one, her enforced self-abortion and the other, her atrocious assassination of her husband are emblematic expression of her turmoil flanked by the other and the self. Her women characters are tantalized by the possibility of passion, which they mistake for love and self-expression. America which appears to be a free land, a veritable dreamland, is the enigma of existence for all Indian girls.

Dimple, who is never, taught the significance of married life and motherhood reacts contrary to this view. She feels motherhood will rob her of the pleasures of leading a cozy life in foreign countries. Hence, she violently aborts the baby. "She had skipped rope until her legs grew numb and her stomach burned; then she had poured water from the heavy bucket over her head, shoulder, over the tight light curve of her stomach. She had poured until the last of blood washed off her legs; then she had collapsed". (P.42) Dimple has no remorse of her action and gets relieved on the pretext that she will no longer carry any relics from her past life to the U.S. This cruel action shows how the dream of migration brings out the moral degeneration of Dimple. Rosanne Klass comments:

For an Indian wife, childlessness is a disaster, pregnancy the achievement that seals her status. To overturn such ingrained values would involve a major emotional upheaval; yet Dimple acts on the vaguest aid, most defined impulses, and thinks more about it.(88)

However, some critics view her self-abortion as "a sacrament of liberation from traditional roles and constraints of womanhood". But whatever she does is purely out of ignorance about Indian values and morality. Bereft of Indian values, Dimple lands on the land of milk and honey with her dreams and aspirations. In spite of possessing an adventurous spirit, Dimple gets baffled by exposure to American culture. Nagendra Kumar explains her condition thus: "How a boorish, an innocent Indian wife can keep her nerves in a country where murder was like flapping the bugs". (49) Dimple's reaction is quite natural as she comes from a sheltered home, at the beginning: Dimple suffers due to Amit's joblessness. Later, Amit's professional life makes her sad as he fined little time for his wife.

Mukherjee present Indian Americans and Americanized Indians in this novel to explain cross-culturalism. The former is represented by Sens, Mehras, Khannas and Bhattacharyas and the later by Mullicks. In fact Sens are with Amit through his thick and thin. The Indian American care for their Indianness. For example, Sens create an Indian aura in their apartment with a framed batik wall hanging with a picture of king Ram and his court. Indian Americans are conscious of their Indiansim, whereas Americanized Indians are for their oneness with the alien culture. Ina Mullick represents this attitude by wearing "pants and mascara" and is "more American than the Americans". Though the Sens warn Amit against the evil influence of Ina on Dimple, a woman with illusion about American life, falls and easy prey to Ina's mysterious charm. Indeed, Dimple is left in a state of confusion and disillusionment at the end of the novel.

Amit and Dimple experience frustration at various levels, while joblessness puts Amit in jitters, Dimple realizes that her marriage is a failure. She was bitter that marriage has betrayed her had not provided all the glittery things she had imagined; "had not brought her cocktails under canopied skies and 3 A.M. drives to dingy restaurants where they sold divine kababs rolled in roti". (P.102) she hates Amit as he fails to fulfill 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 newspapers. Through the media, she is introduced to violence. Added to this, she hears more about murder, smuggling in the basement of the building etc. Hence, she constantly lives in the unknown. The arts of communication is vital in marriage. Padmini Singh in an article on "say what you want and expect from your husband" in 'Women's Era' concludes: "communication between husband and wife is essential to marital happiness. So, he bold enough to communicate your feelings and views. This is how you are to go about

it”(P.24). After getting exposed to the alien culture Amit and Dimple fail to communicate their true feelings for each other. This failure in communication develops a breach between the couple which widens days by day and ultimately ruins their relationship.

The situation worsens after Amit finds a job. He devotes more time to his work. He fails to understand Dimple. He believes that providing material comfort alone will make her happy. The couple moves to a well-furnished flat with all sorts of modern appliances. The living condition of the couple improves, yet they feel lonely. Dimple tries to assimilate with America but fails. She feels that it is difficult to adjust with the people who didn't understand about Durga Pujah”. (P. 114) Dimple is so troubled by this American life that she hurts Amit with a knife when he comes from behind to embrace her. She apologizes to Amit and blames America for making her timid and nervous: “This would not have happened if we stayed in Calcutta. I was never so nervous back home”. (P.132)

Dimple experiences loneliness at every quarter of her life. To drive away the feeling, she turns to the media. T.V becomes her sole companion. Her involvement with the media is so deep that she gets obsessed with words like dark, evil, sinister, gruesome, murder, suicide, mugging etc. she completely trusts the media. Even “her body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne”. (P.117) In this regard Linda Sandier comments on her emptiness:

She is uprooted from her family and her familiar world, and projected into a social vacuum where the media becomes her surrogate community, her global village. New York intensifies her frustrations and unhooks her further from reality. (84)

Dimple's spirit rebels due to over exposure to the alien culture through the media. To feed her rebelling spirit, she starts socializing with Ina Mullick and Milt Glasser, wears Marsha's outfits and goes to the extent of enjoying the prohibited freedom. She uses Marsha's tinted glasses, because: “The purple tinted sunglasses are perhaps the most typical index of American culture. For Dimple, they are a disguise, borrowed from the west, just like Marsha's clothes and the apartment in which she is living” (Janet 98).

To top it all, she seduces Milt in her own bedroom and hides it from Amit. Dimple's activities are purely an outcome of her attempt to become one with American culture. Finally she turns into a neurotic. She complains against her life: “Life should have treated her better, should have added and subtracted in different proportions so that she was not left with a chimera...she was furious, desperate; felt sick. It was as if some force was impelling her towards disaster...” (P.56) Amit observes the external changes in Dimple and he related them to cultural shock. He even promises her to take to India. But nothing changes her nature. Influence of the media on Dimple's life takes an ugly turn. She contemplates the murder of her husband: “He 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 T.V series”. (P.195)

Dimple devises ten different ways to end her life. She becomes schizophrenic, sees her body and soul apart. She suffers from imaginary illness and develops insomnia. She fails to differentiate between the reel life and the real life. She emotionally breaks down and Amit fails to note that. No matter how hard Dimple tries to assimilate the alien culture, the Indian values lying dominant within her condemn her regarding the extra marital relationship with Milt. Her deterioration is complete, when, in an almost dream like state, she kills her husband. Dimple would not have undergone such humiliations, had she stays in India. She would have learnt to reconcile herself to her frustrations. She would not have become murderess. In fact, there is no wonder in her becoming a murderess as in America, “talking about murder is like talking about weather”. (P.161)

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* stand out as a unique fictional work by virtues of its insightful probing into its heroine's psyche. Migrants like Dimple have a propensity to converge, and so does Bharati Mukherjee,

albeit quite gradually to the standard of natives. The constant reminder of language, physical differences and loss of the native land no longer problematizes the exceptionally intricate endeavor of assimilation, rather, Dimples' personality adds to the mystic charm. In this novel, Mukherjee has concentrated on the female protagonist's disillusionment in her life. The cultural conflict leads her to psychic disorder. She depicts the disorienting and dehumanizing effects of urban American society: "The end of the story encapsulates both the strength of her spirited struggle to refashion herself and the difficulty of achieving wholeness when one is stretched between two culture".

