

Themes of suffering and alienation in Bharati Mukharjee's Wife

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ABSTRACT: *The paper focuses on the suffering and alienation the main protagonist Dimple faces in Bharati Mukharjee's novel Wife. The novel throws light on an oppressed woman Dimple who struggles with her identity after her marriage and even after her immigration in America. She feels a sense of loss and alienation at different levels. She desires for an independent identity. Bharati Mukharjee's female protagonists who are immigrants suffer cultural shocks but they fight for their freedom and rights as individual. Dimple considers marriage as the door way to happiness. She wants to taste the fruit of freedom after marriage. She dreams of marrying a neurosurgeon and thinks that it will provide her free love. But the freedom she has associated with marriage and America is shattered soon and her life is limited to the private space of the home much more than in Calcutta. She remains culturally and socially isolated from American society even when extracting a financially better future from it.*

KEY WORDS: *Suffering, alienation, identity, immigration.*

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I. INTRODUCTION:

The novel *Wife* focuses on cultural displacement or dislocation. It presents an Indian woman's migration to the United States which results in a sense of homelessness. The novel portrays the protagonist Dimple's physical, social and psychological isolation both from the surrounding American society and the immigrant Indian community. It focuses on Dimple's experience of cultural dislocation and loss of identity. It also describes the willing exiles of Indians for economic security and comfortable lifestyle.

Bharati Mukherjee, is a contemporary novelist, short-story writer and Critic. She grew up in India and Britain. She was educated in India and the US. Mukherjee emigrated from the US to Canada in 1966. She has taught at a number of Universities in Canada and the United States. She was a versatile immigrant writer, born in a period of transition was a sensitive observant of the then socio-political condition. She draws on her experiences of India while writing with insight about America in which she now lives. She has been praised for her understated prose style and her ironic plot developments and witty observations. She considers her work a celebration of her emotions, and herself a representative of the writers of Indian Diaspora. She has moved away from the traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women characters, towards conflicted women searching for identity and no longer characterized their status as victims. My attempt is to put forth the suffering and alienation a woman faces at different phases of life as portrayed in *Wife* by Bharati Mukherjee.

Reviews of the novel *Wife*

"Mukharjee has built a small, fine, provocative novel that sparkles with the accuracy of its detail and rings with an inner terror and truth" CHICAGO TRIBUNE

"Mukharjee writes with beautiful precision and just the right density of detail. There is an unlikely marriage of Jane Austen and Nathaniel West in her words." THE VILLAGE VOICE

Bharati Mukherjee is a prolific writer who represents the contemporary women's struggle and dive deep into their distorted psyche. Mukherjee's *Wife*, presents a feminist perspective, creating an image of the oppressed woman, Dimple who struggles with her identity but does not know it. She is subject to the desires and whims of others and has been socialized to be unaware of her own desire for an independent identity. She believes she wants to be a wife, but her longing is confused with her desire for freedom. She is also unaware that such a role will not grant her those desires. She attempts to give a picture of a woman who suffers from manmade cultural and traditional prescriptions as well as sanctions which do not allow them live a life free from such restraints. The social issues that the protagonists raise are of cosmopolitan significance.

Mukherjee's much acclaimed novel *Wife* was written during the phase of alienation in Canada. The novel *Wife* falls into the category of the modern novel as it presents an intense inner conflict of a neurotic person. Instead of trying to combine the freedom of the individual with tolerance for fellow beings, Bharati Mukherjee chooses to glorify the alienated individual. The novel *Wife* stands apart as a unique fictional work by the virtue of its deep analysis into the heroine's psyche. It is about her suffering, displacement and alienation. The novel

opens in Calcutta with Dimple Dasgupta's father seeking her a suitable mate of appropriate caste, an engineer, by scouring matrimonial advertisements. When first Dimple is introduced, she is fantasizing about marriage, not to an engineer, but to a neurosurgeon. She imagines it will bring her freedom, love, and a more desirable life. Life has so far been simply a rehearsal for real life, the kind of real life that comes with marriage; for marriage brings opportunities that single women are denied in Indian culture, and Dimple longs for those freedoms more than anything. The desire of Dimple is exhibited clearly as,

“She wanted a different 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”(Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.3).

Dimple worries that she is not fair or bosomy enough for marriage. From the start Dimple seeks to manipulate her identity through whatever means in order to become more desirable. Dimple studied at Calcutta University but is unable to take her exams, over which she despairs because without a B.A. she will be considered less marketable. She adapts and adjusts according to others. Mukherjee presents a feminist perspective, creating an image of the oppressed woman who struggles with her identity. After a prolonged painful waiting which makes her disgust and despair, she is finally married to Amit Kumar Basu, a young engineer and not a neurosurgeon who has planned to go to America. The first of Dimple's series of disappointments comes in learning that Basu is a short Prince Charming rather than a tall one. Her marriage does not turn out her hope and dream. Rather than blossoming by gaining a firmer identity as a married woman, she finds that with each day she becomes less enthused. Her mother-in-law also takes away her name, preferring Nandini instead Dimple. This is the first estrangement from her identity. Even her own name is at stake. Dimple bears everything by consoling herself that a new life awaits her in a foreign country. She feels that the immigration to America will provide her an opportunity to leave behind her monotonous, frustrating middle class life in Calcutta. But to her dismay, disillusionment alone awaits her in America as well. Dimple experiences immigration only as physical and psychological displacements results in a sense of alienation, a deepening loss of control over her mental instability and killing of her husband. Dimple does not love her house where she lives in. She felt her flat is ‘horrid’ (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.18) She does not even love Amit, her husband. She felt he is not a man of her dreams.

“She wanted to dream of Amit but she knew she would not. Amit did not feed her fantasy life; he was merely the provider of small material comforts. In bitter moments she ranked husband, blender, colour T.V., cassette tape recorder, stereo in their order of convenience” (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.113)

She ruthlessly aborts her baby because she feels motherhood will prevent her from enjoying the cozy life which she would get in a foreign country. But, once again, even after going to America, her hopes and dreams are shattered. In America, Dimple and Amit have to stay with a Bengali couple, Jyoti and Meena Sen till Amit gets a job. After entering Sen's apartment Dimple admires everything there and she feels that she is happier than ever before. But her happiness is only short-lived. She feels that “she'd come very close to getting killed on her third morning in America” (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.60).

After a few pathetic attempts to merge herself into the new culture by wearing the borrowed outfit of Marsha and by flirting with Milt Glasser, Dimple experiences total estrangement from herself and her surroundings as well. When Amit was jobless, the gap between the fanciful Dimple and the depressed Amit widens day by day in the U.S. Dimple's sense of alienation further aggravated when Amit refused her suggestion of taking a part time job as a salesgirl in Vinod Khanna's India Emporium. In a vile mood, Dimple shuts herself in the apartment and hates going out. She gets totally cut off from the outside world. The very thought of aloofness disintegrates her psychologically. With utmost disgust and neurosis, Dimple conceives the idea of violence against herself as well as Amit. The author writes: “setting fire to a sari had been one of the seven types of suicide Dimple had recently devised” (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.115).

Dimple is cast into the world of the "other," exiled, unassimilated, but also unable to fully embrace her role as Bengali housewife. Staying home, she is isolated and grows more and more depressed. She is detached and begins to confuse her reality with television. She reacts to others passively, never actively engaging in socializing or housework. She sleeps nearly all day, cooks when necessary, and increasingly watches television and reads magazines while her husband repeatedly inquires what she does all day. Dimple's mind is fully occupied with the films and programs which she sees on Television. She loses touch with reality. She is not able to distinguish between what she sees on the TV and the real life. The murders and death on TV become “the voice of madness” (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.176).

In order to cope with her alienation Dimple starts searching for alternatives including attending and throwing parties and serving food in a glamorous way. Later, in her moments of utmost crisis Dimple turns towards Milt Glasser, brother of Marsha Mookherji and Ina Mullick, an Indian born women living in America but from which she is equally detached. Since Dimple is dangling between the Indian and the American culture, she feels guilty of her extramarital relationship with Milt and worries about hiding the matter from her husband. She is torn by her psychic and emotional tension. The extra marital relationship made Dimple to break all the cultural,

class and familial norms. Finally, in order to escape from her guilty consciousness, she takes the drastic step of murdering her husband Amit, who is insensitive to her feeling. She evolves inwardly from a docile, obedient, submissive and typical Indian wife into a dejected, psychotic, sick and furious murderer in order to get rid of depression and to attain individual freedom. She feels that she cannot bear this sort of life anymore.

Wife ends with Dimple committing murder of Amit. In a stunningly calm and cool manner she takes out the knife from the kitchen drawer and comes very closer to him and “she touched the mole very lightly and let her fingers draw a circle around the delectable spot, then she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times, each time a little harder, until the milk in the bowl of cereal was a pretty pink and the flakes were mushy”(Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.212). Her realities are so confused that she is not fully aware of her own actions. Again it is depicted like a dream. She believes women on television get away with murder.

II. CONCLUSION:

In the novel *Wife*, Mukherjee has concentrated on the female protagonist’s sense of alienation which leads to disillusionment in her life. She celebrates in her depiction of the life of one woman named Dimple who suffers from within and who is exiled from her country and herself. She is very ambitious and wants to achieve freedom but sticking to the Indian ideals of ‘Sati’ and ‘Savitri’. It brings to light failed quests for freedom, thwarted dreams, dislocation and isolation leading to marital unhappiness and loss of identity.

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