

## Identity Crisis in Bharati Mukherjee's Novel 'Wife'

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### Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian-born American writer. She is one of the prominent novelist of Indian Diaspora. She created a fair place for herself in the literary circle abroad, by her contribution of Indian English writing. This paper explore identity crisis and quest for identity in Bharati Mukherjee's novel 'Wife'. The search for identity of immigrants experiences of the clash of cultures and questions of identity, the immigrants face at that time in an alien land are one of the major concerns of Bharati Mukherjee's novels. Her novels are often reveals the contemporary themes. One of these themes is search for their true identity.

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. She was one of the most leading novelist in Indian diasporic literature and also in postcolonial literary studies. She has written eight novels, one of them is 'Wife' in (1975). Her novels revolves around the central theme as Identity crisis. Transformation of culture and identity are revolves and depicts in her novels. 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: diasporic phenomenon, mass-dispersions, cultural displacement, diasporic identity.

### 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 Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*, Dimple is a innocent 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.

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. She discovers as she reconstructs her identities as she moves from one culture to another, one disaster to another, one locale to another. She faced with the loss of identity at each stage.

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 Indian ness, 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.

Dimple suffers from an inferiority complex regarding her beauty. 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 neighbour's balcony made her blush. At night she hallucinated.

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 mind-set 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.

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.

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.

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 centre 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.

In the novel *Wife*, Bharati Mukherjee shows how immigrants try to adopt the American society. The same note of identity crisis and culture conflicts can be seen in her novel *Wife* which focuses on how cultural displacement or dislocation cause new identities but through a rigorous path. To sum up, all the characters in Mukherjee's novels face identity crisis. It is self-alienation of her, that is brought to focus in the novel. In this novel she depicted the women transformation, dual identity, amalgamation of transformation of Indian and American identities. 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

Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian-born American writer. She is one of the most prominent and leading novelist of Indian diaspora. In this paper by studying information, it is observe that she is mainly focuses on the main theme of quest for identity, transformation and transplantation of culture. She has paid a special attentions to the condition of Indian women in United States. Her novels explore the

identities of diasporic women equally in contemporary time. Women also suffer with alienation and rebirth in a new country and then they adopt new culture and new society. Through the characters the author want to depict the symbol of a rootless person fight against isolation and fight for her identity. Stereotypical notions of identity, culture and nationality or depicted from her novels.

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