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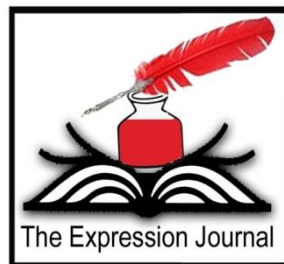


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The Panoptic Gaze of the American Dream: Dimple's Unmet Expectations and Psychological Trauma in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's novel, *Wife* (1975), is a searing tale of Dimple Dasgupta, a "nowhere woman" who remains profoundly dissatisfied throughout her life. This novel delves into the psychological trauma of its protagonist, whose idealized American Dream becomes a tragic reality. Dimple's initial fantasy is to marry a rich and handsome neurosurgeon who would fulfil all her dreams, but instead, she is married to Amit Basu, a simple engineer. Her dreams of a happy married life are attenuated when she fails to receive love and attention from her husband. Her mother-in-law even changes her name to "Suhani." Dimple's behaviour becomes increasingly neurotic and violent. She perceives her husband as a sadist, and in turn, she becomes emotionally detached from him. Upon arriving in America, she finds no respite, as no substantial change is noticed in her life; she realizes that only the form of her problems has changed. She becomes a "nowhere woman" because she is unable to assimilate into American culture. Her Indian mindset prevents her from divorcing her husband, even though American culture would have allowed it. She ultimately loses control of her mind, and in a fit of frenzy, she murders her husband, declaring her independence. She perceives this act as an escape from the traditional confines of Indian patriarchy. This paper narrates Dimple's chimerical fantasies for the foreign land and her subsequent ennui. Her act of murder is a desperate, albeit distorted, attempt to liberate herself from the suffocating and stifling oppression of the Panoptic Gaze. Through this analysis, we will explore how Mukherjee uses Dimple Dasgupta's story to critique the myth of the American Dream, which offers only spurious promises to many immigrants like Dimple and Amit Basu.

Keywords

Bharati Mukherjee, *Wife*, American Dream, Psychological Trauma, Panoptic Gaze, Cultural Shock, Alienation, Patriarchy, Disillusionment, Immigrant Experience, Murder.

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Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee was a globally recognized Canadian-American novelist of Indian ancestry, well-known for narrating the horrific immigrant experiences, cultural clashes, and psychological trauma of her Indian characters. She was born on July 27, 1940, in Kolkata, India, into a well-to-do Bengali family. She earned her English honors from the University of Calcutta in 1959 and her M.A. in English from the University of Baroda in 1961. She then migrated to the United States to study at the prestigious University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she earned an M.F.A. in 1963. She earned her Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of Iowa in 1969. She met and married Canadian writer Clark Blaise.

Bharati Mukherjee started her literary journey with fiction writing. Her published novels include *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave It to Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004), and *Miss New India* (2011). Her first short story collection is *Darkness* (1985). She also wrote another short story collection, *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Apart from these, she wrote a memoir, *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977), with her husband, Clark Blaise. She was a Distinguished Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. She was awarded an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Whittier College in 2013. She passed away on January 28, 2017.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* was published in 1975. There is an interesting story behind the publication of Mukherjee's novel *Wife* (1975). Bharati Mukherjee and her husband Clark Blaise were spending their sabbatical in Calcutta. They had worked on their memoir *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. Then one professor from Columbia University asked Bharati Mukherjee, "What do Bengali girls do between the age of eighteen and twenty-one?" (212). Bharati Mukherjee replied that a Bengali girl has very few options except getting married. It has been written in their memoir *Days and Nights in Calcutta* that 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" (141). Thus, Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* is based on this serious theme. She has depicted her own frustration as a Bengali woman in this novel. Though the story of the novel is set in New York, Bharati Mukherjee kept some things from Toronto also. The novel depicts mainly four phases of Dimple's life.

Phase 1: Youth and Aspirations in Calcutta

Dimple Dasgupta is its main female protagonist. She is a highly ambitious and very complex character. Her name is symbolic; though it represents beauty as "a pit on the cheek," it mainly stands for "a slight depression on a surface." This depression remains on her face before her marriage for a husband and even after her marriage for not getting a caring, loving, handsome, and rich husband. She hates lakes and thinks that these are symbols of "death." Even after her marriage, she finds her apartment feels "horrid." She wants to marry a man who has "stepped out of advertisements, with a forehead from an aspirin ad, lips, eyes, and chin from body-builder and shoulder ads." This is her attempt to fulfil her self-esteem and ego, stemming from her feelings of inferiority and depression. S.R. Karpagama and Dr. B.R. Veeramanib write in their paper "Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*: A Catastrophe of Unmet Hallucination,"

Dimple had anticipated her role as wife, seeing it as a form of liberation, but she eventually realises how difficult it was for her to keep quiet and smile even as she crumbled like an old toy that had been abused by children who pretended to love her. (2240)

Her dreams were quite different from her marital realities. She had envisioned making a unique identity while living in a traditional Indian society. She belongs to a middle-class Bengali family. Her family and social expectation was that a girl should get a good education and must show an interest in Indian art and culture, but Dimple Dasgupta has no future plans for her career. She was told to get ready for marriage now. She was told about how to become an ideal wife. She was advised to become an ideal Hindu wife who is dedicated to her family. She was told that a wedding is a great success for a woman. But Dimple wanted to see herself just like a filmy heroine and she also wanted to marry a neurosurgeon so that she may live a luxurious life. As Jasbir Jain in her article "Foreignness of Spirit: The World of Bharati Mukherjee's Novels" says, "*Wife* does not begin where *The Tiger's Daughter* ends, but it progresses in the opposite direction" (15).

Dimple's father is an engineer. The first phase of her life is in Kolkata as an unmarried girl where she has to postpone her education due to a strike. Now a new way for her is marriage. She is looking for the best husband for her. The novel opens with these lines, "Dimple Dasgupta has set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father was looking for engineers in the matrimonial ads" (3). Her parents look for a nice match for her. Dimple thinks that marriage is the gateway of pleasures for a girl. She thinks, "Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund-raising dinners for notable charities. Marriage would bring her love" (3). She holds the view that premarital life is nothing but a "dress rehearsal for actual living" (3). Mukherjee spares no detail in her portrayal of Dimple on the eve of her marriage. She describes Dimple's anxieties, fears, dreams, and erotic fantasies graphically. Dimple also hopes to get an "outstanding husband" (4). Dimple's mother also tries her best to make

Dimple's colour fair. She prepares almond paste to improve her complexion and prescribed: "pre-bath mustard oil massage, ground almond and honey packs, Ping-Pong, homeopathic pills and prayers to Lord Shiva, the Divine Husband" (5). She assures her that she will make her a "real woman" (5). Her main concern is her flat chest which she thinks will become a great hindrance to securing a good husband. She writes about it to Problem Walla c/o *Eves Beauty Basket*, Bombay:

"I am a young woman of twenty with whitish complexion...There is just one annoying flea in my ointment. The flea is my flat chest. As I am sure you realize, this defect will adversely affect my chances of securing an ideal husband and will sorely vex the powers of even the shrewdest matchmakers in this great nation. Therefore I am sure will agree it is imperative that I do something about my problem and enhance my figure to the best of my ability. Please do not, I beg you, advocate chicken soup, homeopathic pills, exercise and massages. I have tried them already.... Need I say that I am desperate, almost suicidal? I see life slamming its door in my face. I want to live!" (10-11)

One day Mr. Dasgupta scans the matrimonial columns of newspapers where he checks horoscopes of the grooms also. He is so serious about her marriage that he takes one month's leave to "pull off the wedding" (14). Fortunately, a marriage proposal comes from Amit Basu who has applied for immigration in America, Canada, and Kenya. Dimple's father praises her in these words, "She is sweet and docile; I tell you she will never give a moment's headache" (15). In the paper, "Emergence of Female Sensibility in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*," Dr. Sunita Rani Mehra writes, "The novel makes a realistic show of a very common practice of displaying a girl as an object before the family of bridegroom" (710). Finally, Dimple is married to Amit Basu, an engineering graduate from IIT Kharagpur. He has planned to migrate to the United States for his further education.

Phase 2: The Constricting Life of a Joint Family Wife

After her marriage, Dimple Dasgupta starts living with Amit Basu in a joint family. She feels suffocated in that environment and she does not get any liberty or privacy in that house. She is not even able to choose the color of the curtains as per her wish. She comes to know the reality when she moves to a "horrid, dingy apartment on Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road," where Amit makes her feel even more distressed when he says, "I always thought I'd marry a tall girl. You know the thing I mean one meter sixty-one or sixty-two centimetres, tall and slim. Also convent-educated, fluent in English" (26). She realizes that the role of a wife in a joint family is very challenging. She has to take care of her husband and become a "pleasure dispenser" for him. She gets the first jolt of marriage when her mother-in-law changes her name from Dimple to Nandini, which means "holy cow." She feels that "happy people don't talk to themselves." Due to her loneliness, she begins to talk to herself.

Her husband Amit has a strange habit of killing crows, which shows his cruel nature. He has killed "two hundred and fifty crows by now." It shows his sadistic nature. She says, "This was a new Amit, younger than Pintu, it seemed, his low voice tinny with excitement. This must be the real Amit, the boy who lives with his mother and brother in the third-floor flat on Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road. What does he know of marriage?" (29).

He has many parrots as pet birds and he busy nine more parrots. He loves parrots because he finds them cute and harmless. She does not have privacy in this house and they have to go to a restaurant to talk. Amit wants Dimple to call him Mit or Mitu out of love, but Dimple has no such tendencies. Dimple kills a mouse, which shows her violent nature. "I will get you!" she screamed. "There's no way out of this, my friend!" She seemed confident now, "a woman transformed." And in an "outburst of hatred, her body shuddering, her waist taut with fury, she smashed the top of a small grey head" (35). A "very small creature with a fat belly. To Dimple the dead mouse looked pregnant" (35). After killing this mouse she feels a strange sense of satisfaction. She thinks that she is establishing her identity in this way. She wants to enjoy her life and when she gets pregnant she does an abortion by skipping rope. She had "picked a skipping rope as her weapon" (41). She thinks that abortion is "a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood" (Sharma 15). It was the time when he gets his confirmation for immigration to America.

Phase 3: Immigrant Life in America

Dimple and Amit start living in America with his IITian friend Jyoti Sen's family. Dimple starts spending time with other immigrants living in America. This phase of her life also does not give her any happiness because she finds no change in her life. Amit shows his immigrant nature and he tells her that his main motive is to earn money and enjoy life in India. That is why he does not try to assimilate into the American culture and prefers to live in the company of other Indian immigrants. "Cultural Multiplicity and Cultural Shock in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*," T. Devi Priya Darsini and Dr. M. Nagalakshmi write in this context, "Mukherjee's heroine Dimple goes through a horrific process of culture shock in her second book, *Wife*" (159). Dimple is surprised to see a wonderful life in America but she feels an inferiority complex when Amit does not give her due attention. Dimple thinks that Sita was an ideal woman because she gave a fire ordeal for her husband and still remained polite and devoted to her husband. She thinks that she can never become like Sita. When she goes to America, she finds Sita as a "heavy buttocked Sita of the rounded hips" (47) or the "voluptuous Sita hip-deep in pale orange flames" (61). Rani Dharker writes in her paper "Marriage as Purdah: Fictional Rendering of a Social Reality":

Marriage is a sun; around which the girl's life rotates... the girl learns early that he 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 Gorwain Gujarat and Hartalikain Maharashtra where a girl from the age of three starts fasting for a good husband. (49)

Phase 4: Mental Breakdown and Tragedy

After that they are shifted to an apartment in Manhattan. This time Dimple gets in touch with some English women like Milt Glasser. She feels quite lonely and alienated. Her husband remains busy with his duty and Dimple keeps watching TV. She watches crime serials from which her mentality changes and she becomes aggressive. She feels terrified all the time and spends sleepless nights. The difference between reality and illusion dissolves and Amit also does not cooperate with her, due to which she becomes

very aggressive. She loses her mental balance and one day she stabs her husband with a kitchen knife.

Ina Mullick is a symbol of Western feminism. Watching TV remains the major pastime for Dimple. She tries American dishes and tastes beef and vodka silently. She makes friends with Milt Glasser and her female friends. She enjoys her romantic day with Milt and at night lives a loveless life with Amit. When meetings with Milt Glasser and Ina Mullick become sparse, she feels depressed and alienated. She feels that she has lost her balance, and that “a creature of serpentine curls and heaving bosom that would erupt indiscreetly through one of Dimple’s orifices” (158). Her TV world merges with the world of imagination and consequently leaves her in a confusion “between what she has seen in TV and what she had imagined” (157). The idea of murdering Amit ironically makes Dimple feel “very American somehow, almost like a character in a TV serial” (195). And her American frenzy accomplishes her wish. Dimple has not been able to adjust to the familial circumstances.

Dimple leads an “exciting, liberated life with Americans like Milt Glasser and his friends,” and “during the night she lives loveless life with Amit.” In the company of Milt Glasser, she explores the “inhuman maze of New York” (196). Her loveless life also adds to her problems. She suffers from insomnia and even starts thinking about committing suicide. But soon Dimple realizes the superficiality of her existence and feels disgusted with it. In the thick of despairing moments, she feels “like a shadow without feelings” (200). Later she tells Meena Sen that she is in a “terrible crisis” and that she is suffering from “insomnia and headaches,” which Meena interprets as “homesickness” (205). She thinks that she can neither become an American like Ina Mullick nor an Indian like Meena Sen or Mrs. Roy. She is stuck between the dilemma of the East and West, and this cultural shock makes her life miserable. R. Vignesh opines in his paper “Cultural Shock in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife*,” “Bharathi Murkerjee’s *Wife* concerned on the cultural conflict of the East and the West. It has a heroine of Indian origin, who suffers a cultural shock by going to American” (461). Dimple thinks that her husband is a “neurotic self” that needs to be destroyed. This reflects her inherent tendency for violence, even for her husband. She also thinks that she is “also a victim of her own neurotic tendencies” which incited her to kill her husband. Bharati Mukherjee writes about this incident and the end of their marital bond:

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 misty and would have embarrassed any advertiser, and then saw the head fall off but of course it was her imagination because she was not sure any more what she had seen on the private screen of three AM. And it stayed upright, still with its eyes averted from her face.... Women on television got away with murder. (212–13)

While killing Amit Basu, she notices that her husband has a mole on his chest, and she stabs him on the chest seven times. This cannot be called just the murder of a husband; in fact, it is also a symbol of the destruction of the institution of marriage. Hindi wedding rituals have seven steps around the fire, and Dimple also stabs her husband seven times, which declares the total end of patriarchy. Jody Mason argues

about Dimple's psyche, "Dimple's mind is not an insane one; her body is not... uncontrollable, hysterical... murder is a choice for Dimple albeit a choice that is exercised in a limited oppressive space... her violence toward Amit is a boldly act but it cannot be read in isolation, Mukherjee insists that we also understand the mental processes that preface this act" (5).

Conclusion

Thus, this novel narrates Dimple's life from her youth to the tragedy. She waits for her husband, but when she finds that he is not suitable for her, she kills him and declares her identity. This novel also tries to show how an immigrant woman boldly breaks patriarchal bonds. All this also happens just because Dimple Dasgupta feels totally lonely in America and finds nobody of her own there. She becomes depressed and maniacal due to which she goes to that level. Dimple's journey is a search for a voice and an identity. Her tragedy is that she fails completely in this quest and ultimately resorts to violence. Dr. Satrughna Singh calls dimple "a phobic personality" (53) in his paper "Conflict between Aspirations and Reality: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*." Thus, this novel can be called the tragedy of a "nowhere woman." Nidhi Joshi writes in her paper "Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*: A Tragedy of Unfulfilled Dreams," "Dimple does not belong to anywhere" (120). She belongs to neither India nor America. She remains rootless and placeless in an alien world. She is trapped between the East and the West and is not able to assert her identity, neither in India nor in America. She loves reel life, but real life torments her. In this way, she is not able to escape her "schizophrenic" world.

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