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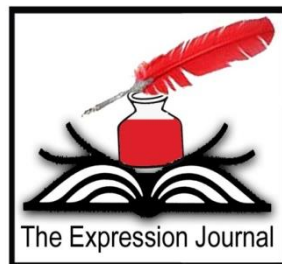


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From Nostalgia to Neurosis: Unfulfilled Dreams and Trauma of Immigrant Experience in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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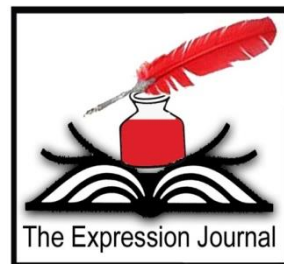
Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* (1975) is a psychological novel that depicts Dimple's dreams, desires, and desperation. She dreams of cocktail parties, designer clothes, and a handsome, rich husband, a vision shaped by her consumption of Western magazines and movies. Her belief that marriage is a gateway to pleasure is proven wrong after her marriage to Amit Basu, a cold and money-minded engineer. She finds herself living in a dingy apartment in Calcutta on Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road, where she feels a lack of love and care from her husband. Even after moving to America, she does not notice any change in her husband's behaviour, which leaves her feeling utterly broken. Dimple had romanticised her American experience, but America also brings her trauma and an identity crisis. She had thought marriage was a ticket to a happy life, as she had only seen in movies, but her dreams are utterly shattered when she faces cultural displacement and personal alienation. This novel also narrates her psychological decline. Watching movies and crime serials turns her into a criminal mindset. She is neither an ideal Indian woman nor a liberated American woman. Her mental state deteriorates, leading to her neurotic behaviour and paranoia. Her obsession with morbid fantasies and her dream to live a grand lifestyle make her a criminal when she kills her husband by stabbing him. This act can be seen as a misguided step toward Dimple's self-assertion and liberation from the patriarchal structure. This paper is an attempt to explore how her nostalgic feelings lead to her neurosis and turn her into a criminal. Patriarchal pressure, her immigrant psyche, blind imitation of Western culture and her trauma—all these factors turn her into a criminal.

Keywords

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

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Introduction

Every person on this earth has the right to dream. Dreams of every individual are different. Generally, boys have dreams to marry a beautiful girl, earn money, and enjoy life. Unfortunately, many of them strive hard even to secure a good job. An unmarried girl also has so many dreams before her marriage. She has some cherished moments, thinking about her future. They do not generally think about a prince of their dreams; in fact, it is also a world of possibilities. The form of these dreams tells the type of her personality. They think about a rich man who will marry them and will give them time, love, and respect. Some girls are overambitious and they want to get all their dreams realised only through their marriage. They think that their would-be husband will help them fulfil their dreams. They think that their life will be filled with joy, laughter, and prosperity. However, most of the girls' dreams are broken just after their marriage when they confront the reality of life. The girls' dreams are shattered when their prince charming starts controlling their life and they have to do all the domestic chores of the household. The care of the elders in the family and delicate handling of the tiny toddlers remain the most challenging tasks for them. This collision of dream and reality remains much painful to them. The girls who were very hopeful and full of life feel morose and melancholy because they find themselves in a world they have never imagined. In such situations, these girls feel very depressed. They start thinking that their marriage has proved just like a prison cell to them and they feel like caged birds. Such a situation makes them realise a profound sense of loss of their dreams and identity. The dreams which once gave them wings now weigh them down and never give them an opportunity to fly in the sky of opportunities. In this way, many girls' dreams are shattered badly and they are generally not prepared for this brutal reality. They are not able to bear this shock and start feeling alienated. Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* (1975) also deals with the same theme in which Dimple Dasgupta's dreams are badly shattered.

Bharati Mukherjee as a Diaspora Writer

Bharati Mukherjee is a significant novelist in Indian diaspora literature. She has gained worldwide acclaim through her literary contribution. She has written her novels based

on Bengali girls on a foreign land. Bharati Mukherjee was born on 27th July 1940 in Calcutta (now Kolkata), Bengal Presidency, British India. She was born in a rich Bengali family. She was the second of three daughters to Sudhir Lal and Bina Mukherjee. She grew up in a traditional Hindu traditional and rituals, but got western education from her young age. The influence of Hinduism is also seen in her novels, as Kellie Holzer remarks:

Mukherjee's fiction is infused with references to Hinduism, reflecting her inherited religion. The protagonists of the novels are frequently likened to or associated with Hindu goddesses. Jasmine metamorphoses into goddess Kali to avenge herself of rape by the disfigured Vietnam veteran Half-face who accompanied her on the last leg of her voyage to America. Dimple struggles with the traditional notion of ideal Indian wifehood as portrayed by Sita in 'The Ramayana', and Hannah reconfigures the mythic Sita in order to more closely identify herself with Sita's story. (172)

She got her education from prestigious Loreto House in Kolkata, an institution run by Irish nuns. She earned her English honours from the University of Calcutta in 1959 and her M.A. in English from the University of Baroda in 1961. She went to America and earned a degree M.F.A. in 1963. She earned her Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of Iowa in 1969. She met Canadian writer Clark Blaise in America with whom she married and co-authored two non-fiction books. Fakrul Alam writes that Bharati Mukherjee also faced identity crisis in different countries and she has penned her own experiences also in her novels. He writes, "Her own struggle with identity, first as an exile from India, then an Indian expatriate in Canada and finally as an immigrant in the United States has led to her current state of being an immigrant in a country of immigrants." (10)

Bharati Mukherjee started her journey of writing with fiction publications. She has many published novels to her credit, such as *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). She wrote short story collections: *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). She won the National Book Critics Circle Award for her second story collection. Apart from these, she wrote a memoir, *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977), with her husband, Clark Blaise. She taught at many prestigious institutions like McGill University, Skidmore College, and the University of California, Berkeley. She worked as 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 breathed her last on 28th January 2017.

Dimple's Life in Calcutta

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* (1975) is the story of a woman, Dimple Dasgupta, who is an overambitious woman. In the opening pages of the novel, Dimple Dasgupta's dreams have been narrated by the novelist. She is dissatisfied with her life in Calcutta. Her father is an engineer. She has passed her graduation and is in her early twenties. Her other friends are attending shorthand classes, but Dimple does not want to study further. She has dimples on her face. She hates lakes and thinks that they symbolise death. She is waiting for something else for her life. She is dreaming of getting married to a neurosurgeon so that she may enjoy a life of luxury. "Dimple Dasgupta has set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father was looking for engineers in the matrimonial ads" (3). Her man of dreams is also a unique man whose every part of his body has been taken from the TV advertisements. Not only this, her dreams are different from other girls. She thinks that marriage is a gateway of pleasure and liberty for girls. She thinks, "Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail

parties on carpeted lawns, and fundraising dinners for notable charities. Marriage would bring her love” (3). As Jasbir Jain in her paper “Foreignness of Spirit: The World of Bharati Mukherjee’s Novels,” states, “*Wife* does not begin where *The Tiger’s Daughter* ends, but it progresses in the opposite direction” (15). She hopes to get a very cooperative, loving, and rich husband who can give her all the pleasures of the world.

Dimple’s mother knows that Dimple does not have a fair complexion; that is why she tries to make her complexion fair. She gives almond paste to apply on her face to Dimple so that she may have a glow on her face. She also prescribed “pre-bath mustard oil massage, ground almond and honey packs, Ping-Pong, homeopathic pills and prayers to Lord Shiva, the Divine Husband” (5). Rani Dharkar 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 paraayadhan (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 Hartalika in Maharashtra where a girl from the age of three starts fasting for a good husband. (49)

Dimple had a flat chest, and she thinks that it will be a big problem for her in marriage because she will not look like a real woman. It becomes her serious concern and even brings suicidal thoughts to her mind. That is why she writes for its treatment to Problem Walla c/o Eve’s Beauty Basket, Bombay:

There is just one annoying flea in my ointment. The flea is my flat chest. As I am sure you realise, 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 you 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? (10-11)

One day her father was reading some matrimonial columns of the newspapers and he found Amit Basu’s profile, who was an aeronautical engineer. He had applied for immigration to America, Canada, and Kenya. He finds Amit a suitable match for her daughter. Dimple’s father praises Dimple 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 the bridegroom” (710). Amit had completed his engineering from IIT Kharagpur. Their wedding is fixed and it was a turning point for Dimple.

Marriage and Disillusionment

After her marriage, Dimple comes to know that her husband has a limited income. She confronts the shocking reality of her life. She has to live in the joint family of her husband. Dimple gets the first shock of her life when her mother-in-law changes her name from Dimple to Nandini, which means “a holy cow.” She thinks that this name will suit her better. It has symbolic overtones that she tries to see Dimple as a simple, silent, docile woman. The strange thing is that she is not able to choose the colour of the curtains of the apartment on Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road. She feels dejected when she comes to know that she is

not the girl of her husband's interest. Amit tells her that he wanted to marry a tall and highly educated woman. Dimple has nothing much like her husband's expectations. Amit reveals his expectations, "I always thought I'd marry a tall girl. You know the thing I mean one metre sixty-one or sixty-two centimetres, tall and slim. Also convent-educated, fluent in English" (26).

Dimple's dreams are badly shattered because she does not get proper time to talk with her husband. They have to go to a restaurant for their private discussion; it was a suffocating experience for her. Furthermore, she also notes that Amit was also thinking of her just like a commodity and she thinks that she has become merely a pleasure dispenser to her husband. She feels lonely in the apartment and starts talking to herself. 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)

Bharati Mukherjee has used symbols of crows in this novel. Amit has an awkward habit of killing crows, and he had killed two hundred and fifty crows. Killing crows means having a sadistic personality. "This was a new Amit, younger than Pintu, it seemed, his low voice tiny 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). On the other hand, he loves parrots and keeps them as pet birds because he thinks that parrots are beautiful and harmless. He buys two parrots for him. This shows that Amit does not like any harmful thing and he hates dark colours. It is an indirect indication that Dimple also had a bit dark complexion and he perhaps does not think of her as a girl of his choice. Moreover, she does not get any love and attention from her husband. She wants to enjoy her life and does not want to have any babies because she thinks that children are a hindrance in a happy conjugal life. She does not want to take any burdens in her life. When she gets pregnant, she does an abortion by skipping rope. She takes "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). She wants to get rid of this suffocating life, and fortunately Amit gets his confirmation letter to migrate to America. She thinks that America will provide her a relief from this hellish life.

Cultural Displacement and Morbid Fantasies

Unfortunately, America also does not give much comfort to Dimple. She just feels a change of place but not a change in her life. Amit had limited resources and American lifestyle was very costly. Amit and Dimple have to live with his IITian friend Jyoti Sen's family. She tries to mingle with other Bengali immigrants in America. Amit tells her that he has come there to earn money so that he may enjoy life in India. He had no plans to settle in America which also makes Dimple sad. She thinks that she will have to undergo the same problem again. It loses her hope. Amit does not pay much attention to her. She compares herself to Sita of the Ramayana who had to undergo a fire ordeal. Likewise, she also thinks that she will also have to face challenges in her life. Dr. Himanshu Sharma writes in his paper "Shattered Dreams and Identity Crisis: A Critical Analysis of Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*," "This novel deals with the trauma of expatriation" (251).

Amit and Dimple shift to another apartment in Manhattan where Dimple gets American exposure for the first time because she meets some American people like Milt Glasser and Ina Mullick there. Dimple meets a woman Ina whose open-minded nature is

liked by Dimple. Under her influence, Dimple starts having an affair with an American man, Milt Glasser, which cuts her emotional attachment with her husband. 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)

She finds that American women represent western feminism because these women are not like other Bengali women immigrants. They drink, smoke, and have multiple sexual relationships. Dimple feels entrapped. She is in a dilemma of what to do and what not to do in the situation when she finds her husband also cold and indifferent. She tries American dishes and tastes beef and vodka silently. She feels alienated and depressed in America. She resorts to watching TV but she learns negative things from TV. She starts loving crime serials and also does not know when she also has this criminal mentality. She feels so depressed that she loses her mental balance and becomes “a creature of serpentine curls and heaving bosom that would erupt indiscreetly through one of Dimple’s orifices” (158). She finds that she is spending a loveless life with her husband. She thinks that this marriage has destroyed her life and shattered all the dreams of a blissful life. She decides to uproot this problem for ever. She becomes so obsessed with her solitude and Amit’s negligence that she decides to kill her husband. This idea of murdering Amit ironically makes Dimple feel “very American somehow, almost like a character in a TV serial” (195). An Indian woman is considered the defender of her husband’s life. There are examples of Sati Savitri who brings her husband’s life from Yamalok but Dimple does just contrary to it. But Dimple is lost in the “inhuman maze of New York” (196). Dimple tells Meena Sen that she is suffering from “insomnia and headaches,” which Meena interprets as “homesickness” (205). She feels some haunted fear in the apartment which makes her restless.

Dimple thinks that she is neither an American nor an Indian. She is stuck between the mirage of the East and West. She faces cultural shock in America as R. Vignesh also writes in his paper “Cultural Shock in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife*,” “Bharathi Mukherjee’s *Wife* is concerned with the cultural conflict of the East and the West. It has a heroine of Indian origin, who suffers a cultural shock by going to America” (461). 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 bold act but it cannot be read in isolation, Mukherjee insists that we also understand the mental processes that preface this act” (5). Her act of killing her husband raises the question of a woman’s liberation. Dr. Satrughna Singh calls Dimple “a phobic personality” (53) in his paper “Conflict between Aspirations and Reality: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife*.” Bharati Mukherjee narrates this incident very dramatically in the novel:

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 a.m. And it stayed upright, still with its eyes averted from her face.... Women on television got away with murder. (212–13)

Conclusion

In conclusion, Bharati Mukherjee in her novel *Wife* masterfully depicts Dimple's trauma and her destructive journey from nostalgia to neurosis. She had thought that marriage would bring her joy, but it becomes the cause of her mental torture. Her American experience also fails to provide her with an identity. Dimple's initial dreams of freedom and luxury are cruelly shattered by the realities of marriage and migration. She belongs to neither India nor America and becomes a nowhere woman, as Nidhi Joshi writes in her paper "Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*: A Tragedy of Unfulfilled Dreams," "Dimple does not belong to anywhere" (120). At the end of the novel, Dimple kills her husband and declares her independence due to her neurosis. Maya Manju Sharma observes that Dimple "is a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood" (5).

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