

**CULTURAL DICHOTOMY AND SEARCH FOR FEMININE SELF IN
BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *WIFE***

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Abstract

Through the study of Bharati Mukherjee's second novel *Wife* (1975), the present paper analyzes the predicament of cross-cultural dichotomy and search for selfhood of an Indian woman, Dimple the protagonist from a feminist perspective which leaves her undecided knowing how to react. With a brief discussion on culture, this paper also highlights how being caught between the two cultures of the east and the west, the past and the present, the life in America with its immigrant problems create chaos and disorder in the relationship between husband and wife. This paper also brings forwards a woman's immigrant experiences and her encounter with new culture are bound to be different from that of a man; a woman needs psychological and physical fulfillment of love, feeling and desire from her husband and the lack of this compels a woman to think herself doubly marginalized: as a woman and as an immigrant.

Keywords: Cultural Conflicts, Dichotomy, Feminine, Selfhood, Postcolonial, Immigrant.

The postcolonial writing of the late twentieth century forms an important dimension of the postcolonial engagement with the amalgamation of different cultures. These writings address the problems that arise from the transnational space of a fluid community that is neither at home nor outside. It elaborates issues such marginalization, cultural insularity, social disparity and the hybridity of cultures. Indian English immigrant writing, due to its cross-cultural origin has intrinsically been revolving around the theme of the compelling and challenging encounter between two cultures, apparently antagonistic in their attitudes, approaches and values.

Bharati Mukherjee has carved her distinct niche in postcolonial writing. An examination of her works reveals her movement from expatriation to immigration which coincides with her migration from Canada to the U.S.A. Mukherjee distinguishes between the aloofness of expatriation and the exuberance of immigration. As the very terms imply, expatriation focuses on the country that has been left behind, while immigration emphasizes the country into which one has entered as a migrant (Nalini 189). Mukherjee writings of the first stage can be classified as being the writings of her expatriation stage, these have mainly written during her early dark days in Canada, when she felt almost alienated from her surroundings and present this feeling as “the ever present fear of failure and betrayal” (Mukherjee, *Darkness* 3). Mukherjee suffered racial discrimination in Canada and hence the works written during this period foreground emotions of alienation through her protagonists. These writings include *The Tiger’s Daughters* (1971), *Wife* (1975) and *The Canadian Stories of Darkness* (1985). Abha Pandey in *Indian Diasporic Literature* writes, “Bharati Mukherjee has shown dual cultural shock. This migration or cultural transplant lends to a crisis of identity and final reconciliation to the problem of a displaced person in America as well as India . . . in all fiction of Bharati Mukherjee covering many moods of expatriations, nostalgia and frustration. (Pandey 125)

There is so much of cultural mixing in the postcolonial era that it has given birth to ‘hybrid culture’. Graham Huggan asserts that the present era is the era of “hybridization” (Kaur 460). Everything across the world is amalgamation. The cross-cultural mixing at present can be seen with the effect of the past. Hybridization compels immigrant to experience the different aspects of every culture. As culture is a derivative of individual experience, something learned or created by individuals themselves or passed on to them socially by contemporaries or ancestors. Each community, group and society is having its own trends and living pattern, which affects identity. Culture is both the individual construct and social construct; culture is “as much an individual, psychological construct as it is a social construct” (Smith 20). To some extent, culture exists in each and every one of us individually as much as it exists as a global, social construct. Smith expresses, “Culture as social, as a way of life whereby it expresses the structure of feeling of a social group . . . meanings and values of ordinary behavior and social institution as well as in terms of their place in art and learning” (Smith 23). Tyler also defines, “Culture . . . is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (qtd. in Oatey 2).

Through the encounter with different cultures, immigrants often try to find synchronization between the native culture and the adopted one. Every immigrant comes in terms with “hybridized identity” (Kaur 460) that connects him with more than one culture at same time but this only confuses him in deciding his culture and this notion raises the conflict among the generation. In this process, the people lost the roots of their native culture as Rudyard Kipling says, “he has lost his own country and has not acquired any other” (Kipling 315). Bharati Mukherjee has also admitted that “the finding of a new identity . . . the painful or exhilarating process of pulling yourself out of the culture that you were born . . . then replanting yourself in

another culture” (Nayak 123). The immigrants try to struggle mutely and try to adopt the new culture but in vain. They feel psychological eccentricities like ‘nowhere’ and ‘everywhere’ in both the countries. Their psyche is torn between rootlessness and alienation.

New cultural elements further affect their identity and they raise the question of ‘self’ as an individual. ‘Self’ in relation to an individual can be defined “as an immaterial substance which is something more than just the physical body which has strong intuitive pull” (Hanniball 1). Freud also argued that the primitive ego (the self) was dominated by the pleasure principles, seeking to satisfy wishes, desires and drives—libido (Carr 4). Selfhood or the idea of existent of the ‘self’ seems once puzzling, as well as vastly important in the most personal sense to the experiences we undergo as human beings well as the way we receive and process sensory information from the external world. ‘Self’ helps us make sense of our lives, develop an idea of who “I really am” and aids in a person’s ability to form relationships and communicates and compares with others around us (Hanniball 8). Hegal also argues that the consciousness of self is only gained through acknowledgment by the other. Kant’s classical mode conceptualizes ‘self’ as “a thing, an object, with object like characteristics and with the capacity to serve as an object in relation to other objects” (Arciero 11). Thus ‘self’ presents the way “We experience the world, the way we process external information, and the way it affects the formation of our desires, intentions and subsequent actions” (Hanniball 4).

The east and the west clearly stand in stark contrast against each other in their conception of selfhood and identity. Further, the eastern conceptions of ‘self’ differ from those of the west in very different ways. The eastern concept of selfhood being anchored in interpersonal relationships stands apart from those of the western conception. The western ‘self’ is at the centre stage, and the world is perceived by and through it. It belongs to the individual and to no other person. Here, the self is sovereign or at least should have a sense of mastery, in its own household; it is a coherent, integrated and unitary whole. It is individual not dividual. Rooted firmly in individualism, the western self is, in short, the measure of all the things (David 34).

Concerning the themes of cultural displacement and search for selfhood, Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* (1975) explores the challenges and hardships of an immigrant in a multicultural society. This novel concerns a traditionally raised Indian woman particularly, Dimple’s cross-cultural conflicts in New York City. The cultural transplant leads Dimple to search for her feminine selfhood and she struggles to tackle the problem of culture and endeavors to assume her true ‘self’ in America. In this process, she shifts her east identity to a west identity where her original cultural roots come into conflict with the new one to be assimilated in the alien land and her subsequent descent into psychological disorder and murder. During these struggles and assimilations, her psychological condition can be compared to an uprooted plant.

The real quest of ‘selfhood’ in the life of Dimple begins after her marriage to Amit Basu whom she considers a wealthy Indian settled in America. As the Indian culture nurtures a feeling among the girls that the marriage is their door way to happiness, Dimple, a twenty years old, middle class Bengali girl also dreams of marrying a neurosurgeon and hopes that marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties, love and emotions. But Dimple undergoes a great mental ordeal born of her marriage to Amit Basu. Against her dream life in America, she faces the emotional and economical predicament as Amit Basu was also struggling for his job in America. They live in a rented house and Amit was unable to fulfill the dream of Dimple living an ideal American life. Being frustrated of his jobless situation in a new land, Amit as a husband is totally numb towards her wife’s physical and emotional requirements and thus there’s a considerable divergence in their attitudes. His all the time office hours and his business meetings make

Dimple alienated. She finds her world limited only to her husband and beyond that her world is alienating that has no identity in American society. Amit as a husband is failed to understand Dimple, he never tries to understand her dilemma regarding the cultural conflicts in an alien land. Their married life is punctuated all along with “silences and estrangement”. This failure in communication develops a breach between the couple and ultimately ruins their emotional bonding in their relationship.

Amit rarely visits with her on the roads of America and considers that the facilities and comforts only the need for a woman, thus he ignores the emotional support and remarks: “ You must go out, make friends, do something constructive, not stay at home and think about Calcutta” (111). She fulfills her real desire through the violating episodes of Television. After reading and watching the frequent news regarding the murder, she considers it just like the news of weather. She started to live in an implausible world, a world created by Dimple. She is confused between “what I am” and “what I have to be.” Finally, in a fit of Frenzy, out of depression and disgust and having failed to find a proper answer of her ‘self,’ her psychic dislocation and mentally pressures lead her to murder her husband. She chooses his hairline and stabs seven times on it which presents her desire of liberation from the bondages imposed by matrimony. She frees herself from the constraints of relationship and regenerates herself through blood.

Since her childhood, Dimple is aware about her marginal position in the conventional society which has little regard for women. Her migration to America compels her to cast away the traditional identity denoting system by rebelling against the constraint socio-cultural set up regarding the position of women as wife and carve to form her identity. She expects a different identity rather than a housewife. She understands that the promise of life as an American wife is not being fulfilled. She comes out of the conventional docile, obedient, submissive Indian wife into a defected, psychotic, sick and furious murderer in order to attain individual freedom. Dimple’s psychological imbalance, her effusive daytime sleeping, her nightmares and indecisiveness remain unknown to Amit up to his dying day. Thus, Immigrant identities and cultural conflicts also affect the marital relationships between husband and wife.

Dimple as a wife faces the psychological conflicts struggling in her mind, as she ventures into the western way of life and culture. Dimple’s marriage with Amit Basu involves some opposition of Indian and American values and customs. She believed that she would be free to experience a life different and distanced from that which she had left behind in India, the desire and new possibility of life which compels her to end her pregnancy by a forcefully skipping as it might be a hurdle for her move to America with her husband. But her entire stay in America shows the opposite picture of life. One obviously considers that marriage does not work for a mutual understanding in marital relationship as Indian marriages are often based on an invalid and unfair custom. Dimple frequently as a woman and as an immigrant deals with her memories and contemplates her status in marriage—frequently seen as crippling or suppression of dreams. While passing through the cultural conflicts, Dimple also faces the patriarchal social structure through the oppressive behavior of her husband even living in west. The Indian rooted traditional and conventional husband does not accept the west ideas regarding the liberation of women and oppresses her through his non-verbal activities. Dimple, thus as a woman and as an immigrant confronts the marginalization and alienation from the both sides. Neither her eastern values nor the western values provide her contentment. She mingles between the Indian and American values. Her conventional thoughts compel her to serve her husband while the non-conventional western thoughts inspire her for demanding the equal status without any gender discrimination.

As an Indian, Dimple never wants to be a part of American society and always tries to maintain her Indian identity. She wants to enjoy American life but fails to assimilate into it thoroughly. In one of Dimple's first and most shocking engagement with American culture, she attempts to buy a new cheesecake for dessert. This scene highlights Dimple alienation because she displaces herself in favor of adopting a culture to replace her own. Mukherjee depicts that Americanness as a cultural identity is something immigrants cannot perform, nevertheless, they try. She hates American English and American system of life. She indulges in a sense of nostalgic thinking about her peaceful life in Calcutta with her family and friends. She is confused between her emotional and cultural dichotomy, "she is scared of self-service elevators of policemen, of gadgets and appliances. She does not want to lose her identity, but feels isolated, trapped, alienated, marginalized" (*Wife* 84). She feels it is difficult to adjust with the people who don't understand about *Durga Puja*. Dimple's attachment to rituals shows the throbbing of Indian pulse in her. It throws light on the Indian woman's failure to getting assimilated to the foreign culture. The narrator comments, "how could she live in a country . . . where every other woman was a stranger, where she felt different, ignored, exposed to ridicule in the elevator" (*Wife* 112). Within the circle of Indian Immigrant too Dimple finds herself an alien. The Indians in America who have adjusted themselves to the American ways of life make her feel an outsider. She accepts herself: "I am sorry, Dimple whispered. There are some things I can't do. Wearing pants is one of them . . . I just don't want to start all this. If I wear pants to eat pizza in the winter, who knows what I'll be wearing to eat at the Dairy Queen next summer" (*Wife* 154). Her deficiencies and lack of fluency in English communication also becomes a hurdle for her in interaction well with the others. Her failed attempt at negotiating the cultural divide reiterates her ability to find her "space" within the confines of an alien culture.

She felt some trouble in the American set up when she came to this city: "She had expected pain when she had to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning . . . but she had not expected her mind to be strained like this, beyond endurance" (115). Her meeting with Indian friends make realized her a pang at her heart, she is struck by their talk and social fancy behaviour which present the lost of Indian culture among them. She bewildered by their way of living, eating, talking and dressing. Although an Indian character named Jyoti told Dimple not to restrict herself to Bengalis or else she'd miss a lot of the experience of being abroad. Introduced to Ina Mullick a "liberated housewife who is "more American than American" (*Wife* 68), Dimple is awed by her air of sophisticated way of talking in English. Because of the influence of Ina and her way of assimilation in American culture, Dimple starts changing and to survive to her won strategies in the new environment. This change can be seen in her inclination to Marsha's brother Milt Glasser, who works as a metaphor for multiculturalism, and as an escape from the conventional way of a wife. She substitutes her Indian marriage with an American relationship; she identifies Milt as the essential American with whom she can engage meaningless small talk "He was, to her, America" (*Wife* 175). But Milt was also failed to understand the inner conflicts of Dimple and does not prove a solution of her melancholy. Her relationship with Milt presents her drifting away from her inherited culture and its values, and the distance her psyche travels. She thus, turns a rebellion and violates all stereotyped image and behaviour of Indian womanhood. Although, she is uneasy with her extramarital relationship with Milt Glasser, her illicit relationship with Milt seems her attempt to find an identity in America or in other words, her Americanized identity.

The Indian women in comparison to men face more frustration and the sense of alienation to adopt a new culture as they strictly follow the conventional and traditional way in their lives.

Panzanesi also notes, “Women as a preserver of traditions, heritage, and continuity are inevitably required to restore a traditional home in a new country” (Chakraborty 200). Dimple also appears as a victim of conflicting culture. She fails to be at peace with herself as well as with her surroundings. She can’t come to terms with either her own culture or American culture. She finds herself at cross-roads and visualizes her life as dying bonfire. Mukherjee says about her, “she remains neither an American nor an Indian. She keeps hanging in the air like the mythical “Trishanku” and typifies the read condition of a person who is caught in the net of two cultures” (Banerjee 67). While rejecting the upholding of conventions and traditions constrained by patriarchal structures, Dimple finds herself in a confused situation where her dilemma increased by observing the western culture regarding the role of woman as a wife, mother and daughter. She is confused between the acceptance and negation of this new culture of west. She raises the questions about her ‘self’ as a woman and as an immigrant in a new country. She feels herself entangles between the binaries east/west, present/ past, new/old, and traditional /modern. While questioning the norms of western society, she passes through the transformation from weakness to strength to freedom. Her confused self compels her to reject the ideal image as a wife of Indian mythology and struggle to adapt herself according to the western women and wife—not bounded to the rigidity and conventional way of living—and thus passing through her psychological disorder and cultural displacement she tries to find herself in a new culture by the murder of her husband, Amit Basu.

The alien circumstances accentuate her hypertension and drive her brink of regression and abnormality. As she cannot come to terms with either own culture or America’s culture, She finds herself ill at odds to suffer the terrible assault lonely existence in America. Dimple’s cultural shock and search for selfhood turn her in to neurotic. At the end of the novel, we find her talking to herself and to the knife that she used to stab him. She chooses his hairline and stabs seven times on it which presents her desire of liberation from the bondage imposed by matrimony. She frees herself from the constraints of relationship and regenerates herself through blood. Although in killing Amit Basu, she offers no hope for a new beginning thus no longer associated with any culture, least of all a successful, new hybrid one, Dimple isolates herself completely. Nagendra Kumar explains her condition in the words, “How a boorish and innocent Indian wife can keep her nerves in a country where murder was like flapping the bugs?” (Kumar 49).

Thus, Mukherjee’s creative world best manifests immigrant experiences through the cultural point of view. In her portrayed of Dimple who emigrates from India to the United States and suffers under the disempowerment and pain due to different cultural background, Mukherjee depicts a fixed American culture that negates individual identity in favour of communal identities located in foreign culture. Her fiction truly reflects the temperament and mood of the present American society as experienced by immigrant in America.

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