

## A WOMAN OF WOUNDED PSYCHIC, VICTIM OF SEGREGATION AND CHAOS IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S 'WIFE'

**Dr. Deepak Kumar**

Associate Professor  
Department of English,  
H.N.B Garhwal  
University Srinagar (Garhwal)

**Anita Goswami**

Research Scholar  
Department of English,  
H.N.B Garhwal  
University Srinagar (Garhwal)

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indo American writer of the recent times, has presented her themes in different dimension than ever before. Being the writer of the modern times, she has mentioned in her fiction the problems faced by Indian and other third-world immigrants who attempt to assimilate into North American life- styles. Using and understanding prose stuffed with ironic developments and with interpretation, Mukherjee focuses upon sensitive protagonists who lack a constant sense personal and cultural identity and are victimized by racism, sexism and other of social oppression. Quest for feminine identity is largely a post-independence social phenomenon influenced by various changing forces of reality-freedom movement, progressive education, social reforms, increasing contacts with the West, urban growth, etc. Feminism emerged as a worldwide movement to secure women's right on the one hand and love, respect, sympathy and understanding of males on the other.

In her first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* Mukherjee has presented a satirical portrait of Indian society from the perspective of Tara Banerjee Cartwright, a young expatriate who is not yet accustomed to American culture yet is estranged from the morals and values of her native land. Bharati Mukherjee's next novel *Wife* (1975), deals with an entirely different problem of expatriates. It resembles Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*. Dimple is the protagonist of the novel. She is an escapist lost in her private world of fantasy. In the beginning at home in Calcutta, Dimple is dreaming about marrying a neurosurgeon, and her father combing the matrimonial advertisement for an engineer. She reads "*The Doctrine of Passive Resistance*" for her university exams and expects to employ domestic passive resistance for example without holding affection, to win the love of the unknown husband, who is the only hope of adult freedom what she has. She became an escapist and lost in her private world of fantasy:

In the beginning at home in Calcutta, Dimple is dreaming about marrying- anybody-but preferably a neurosurgeon and her father is combing the

matrimonial ads for an engineer. She is twenty and already afflicted with signs of passive anger. The tension between her actual powerlessness and forms of freedom suggested her by the changing Indian culture have made her sick (Sathupathi 79).

At last her father found suitable candidate for her, Amit Basu, consulting engineer, who is ideal because he has applied for emigration. Amit is a hardworking and sincere man. He has robust personality and fair colored rather than Dimple. Amit has also family responsibility which he has to perform. Dimple is a girl of dream. She has lived so long in a world of fantasy, world of advertising and advice columns that she is psychologically incapable of understanding another human being, and she cannot comprehend Amit. He is unable to understand Dimple's vision of Sita's obedience, sacrifice and responsibility. She wants to break through the traditional taboos of a wife. She aspires for freedom and love in marriage. This brings her resentment, grief, bitterness, irritability, spite and sterile anger. Dimple is trapped between two cultures and aspires to a third, imagined world. Living in her social vacuum, Dimple is not unlike hundreds of American men and women who believe and are betrayed by the promise of fulfillment offered by the media, and who choose the resolution suggested by a violent atmosphere. The immigrant situation of displacement is of prime interest to writers. Removal from ones background invariable brings about sharpened sense of identity and self-consciousness about one's cultural roots. In this regard Bharati Mukherjee writes:

Extreme case of women, who when transplanted another culture, lose their bearings. Her young heroine, Dimple's final act of violence is unconvincing on the realistic level, yet really is an attempt at trying out a mode other than realistic (Leong 52).

Violence is her fundamental experience of New York. Newspapers, car, radio and casual conversations announce murders in alleys and ice-cream parlous. "Being essentially a mimetic novel, *Wife* invites the traditional test of plausibility and verisimilitude and passes it without a question," says Krishna Baldev Vaid. Dimple's as given the meaning the word taken from Oxford English Dictionary. Dimple: any slight surface depression. With this psychic defect, she naturally reacts in a peevish way to all the things around her. The lake reminds her of death: "She hated the lakes, thought of them as death." She does not like her new name either. "The name is just doesn't suit me." (*Wife* 18) She does not love the house she lives in. The "lace doilies are for her so degrading that she wishes she were back in her own room in Rash Behari Avenue." (30) She does not even love Amit, her husband. When he takes her to Kwality he feels, "He should have taken her to Trinca's." (30) Dimple has a subterranean streak of violence; she is uprooted from her family and familiar world, and projected into a social vacuum where the media become her surrogate community, her global village.

It is very unnatural for a normal girl to "enjoy" the sensation of vomiting and think of getting rid of "whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes." (*Wife* 42) She daydreams about sinister abortionists. She reminds one of Goneril. Goneril wants her body to be blighted with infertility; similarly Dimple "gave vicious squeezes to her stomach as if to force a vile thing out of hiding." (42) The height of her abnormality reaches when she skips her way to abortion: "She had skipped rope until her legs grew numb and her stomach burned; then had poured water from the heavy bucket over her head, shoulders, over the tight little curve of her stomach. She had poured until the last of blood washed off her legs; then she had collapsed." (42) Despair sets in her life. She thinks "marriage had betrayed her, had not provided all the glittering things she had

imagined.”(102) “Her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne.”(117)

Television introduces her to love, middle-American style. Her T.V. Watching stuns her by the incredible violence. It becomes a diabolical trap, a torment without hope of either release or relief. Even the apartment objectifies the psychic decay and degeneration. “There were too many images of corrosion within the apartment.” (*Wife* 127) Her bodily reaction is expressed through her eating habits. “After the fifth spoonful she realized that she was not hungry, was on the contrary, feeling ill and had spilled milk all over her clothes.” (128) In her isolation she dreams of catching diseases, “Leukemia was the most glamorous.”(128) she hurts Amit with Kitchen knife on the plea of protecting herself.

Dimple’s frenzied imagination is a whirl all the while. “After Leni removed her cup Dimple kept on pouring ... over the tray ...till the pregnant-bellied tea pot empty and Leni and Ina were standing and shaking her, “Dimple, Dimple; stop it.” (152) She cogitates upon the nine ways of dying. She sets fire to sari made of synthetic fiber; head in oven; nick wrist with broken glass in sink full scalding dishwater; starve; fall on bread knife while thinking of Japanese Samurai revivals. While Waiting on the platform for the train to arrive, she thinks of containers for husband’s ashes, “should he die a sudden death.” And she wonders “what happened to the bits of bone and organs that were scarred but not totally consumed?” (168) It was becoming the voice of madness, and that leads to her decision to “Kill Amit and hide his body in the freezer.” (195) She sneaked up on him and chose a spot, her favorite spot just under the hairline, where the mole was getting larger and browner. She brought her right hand with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times. (213) Dimple fails to adopt herself in the alien atmosphere and above all the lacks of proper communication with Amit eventually surrendering her mind to be totally conditioned under the influence of T.V. and its unrealistic glamour world and magazines:

The New York appears to prove particularly destructive to Dimple. First it sets her romantic notions about America at naught and then usually activates her inwardly directly martdo by constantly carrying to her gory murder stories. To Dimple death appears to present itself in myriad forms. Sleepers look to her more like corpses than as people under temporary suspension of consciousness (Rajeshwar 95).

The murder of Amit is an assertion of her American identity. It is an American somehow: “almost like character in a T.V.series.” (195) The novel focuses the psychic break-down of an Indian wife in America and the linked deep culture-shock leading to obsession. Free and rebelling throughout, Dimple has no inhabitations. Her troubles lead the plight of the estranged self trapped in the whirlpool of the midpoint of cultural-shock. Spirit of Dimple, like Tara, is lacerated and distressed. She is neither of India nor of American but she is an aimless wanderer between two worlds, her position is like Trishaku. Gayatri Chakravortiy Spivak writes in her article “*Can, the Subaltern Speak?*”

Between patriarchy and imperialism subject constitution and object formation the figure of woman disappears not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘*The Third World Woman*’ caught between tradition and modernization (Spivak 80).

She is neither the woman of T.V. nor to the world of reality but keeps on shuttling between the two. She is trying to release herself from the Utopia but she is a waylaid traveler.

She is yet to reach her target and crave-out an inch for herself. Love and death both are most important things to Dimple as in the case of Maya of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*. While it is the dance of peacocks that defines the tragic dilemma of Maya which chimes in with many other images of dance, it is America that allures Dimple into believing that it stands for love and death. Wife speaks about and is related with the postcolonial complexities of day to day life arising due to cultural dislocation and displacement. The author "reserves the pilgrimage, journeying from East to West, She confronts personal and social violence head on, and splits her complex self into facets, creating characters who shatter like glass." (Sandler 75-76).

Right from the very first day of her arrival in New York, all that Dimple hears from people and sees on the T.V. is about muggings, rape, murder-an aspect of the new world that seems to hold an inexplicable but unending fascination for immigrant-residents like Jyoti Sen. Being an incurable fantasizer and addict to the bright colorful world of advertisements, Dimple falls an easy victim to the various magazine and T.V. advertisement. She accepts them literally and one example, sufficient to speak volumes about her total lack of maturity and depth, is a magazine advertisement which exhorted people to "express" themselves in their "surroundings." (S.Indira) Though she is at times shocked at her own capacity to hate, eventually Dimple exercises her ungratified passions through violence alone. Neither the cultural conflict nor a feminine need for freedom can account for Dimple's bizarre, blasphemous responses. As a critic points out "Dimple's problems are her utter rootlessness." (Jasbir Jain) *Wife* speaks about and is related with the postcolonial complexities of day to day life arising due to cultural dislocation and displacement.

Dimple appears to be trapped between two cultures, belonging to none and aspiring for a third world aspiring for a third one that is her world of immigration and fantasy. It is here she tries to explore for her existence. Her habit of day of day-dreaming and too much watching T.V. serials makes her unable to communicate her husband. When her personal requirements, ambitions and problems are unexpressed, they become complicated and take the shape of physical and mental disorder. Slowly she considers herself as a victim of double marginalization, firstly as a woman who is inappropriate to adjust with her newly married life and secondly as an immigrant unable to settle with an alien culture.

The modern woman does not find any sense in such self-sacrifices and yearns for self-expression, individuality and self –identity. She is trying to free herself of the independence syndrome as says Chaman Nahal:

I define Feminism as a model of existence in which the woman is free of the independence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome where it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group when women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes (30).

Dimple realizes that "she never thought of how hard it was falling apart like a very old toy that had been played with, something quite roughly, by children who claimed to love her." (*Wife* 212) She begins to hate Amit for she considers him the root cause of all the problems. Her 'theorization' is the result of Amit's denial to give her a proper position, and his too much expectation from her to lead a role of an immigrant woman in America; Dimple is helplessly caught in the gripping quest for new female American identity. She fails to create a balance between her Indian ethics and the American life, which leads her towards a state of shock and finally despair that she enjoys with Amit.

Thus in the early novels of her career, Bharati Mukherjee has tried to depict the problems and complexities of arising due to expatriation which has become a broad phenomenon in the present age. According to Jasbir Jain: “Mukherjee’s novels are representative of the expatriate sensibility.” (12) Both Tara and Dimple reveal their expatriation in terms of location as well as spirit. They are the victims of cross-cultural dilemmas faced by expatriates. They show the main characteristic of unbelongingness both their native country and adopted one. Roshni Rustomji-Kerns considers that in these two novels, Mukherjee presents “Some of the more violent and grotesque aspects of cultural collisions.” (659) Through these stories, she has described apart from expatriation other postcolonial complexities in the detail along with humanitarian approach.

## Works Cited

- Jain, Jasbir. “*Foreignness of Spirit: The World of Bharati Mukherjee’s Novels,*” *The j7 &E*, Vol.13, No.2 (July1988). Print.
- Krishna, Baldev Vaid, *In a Review of Wife*, in *Fiction International*, no. 4 and 5, 1975. Print.
- Leong, Liew. *Geok`Bharati Mukherjee: Expatriates and Immigrants, Displacements and Americanization.*” *International Literature in English: Essay on Major Authors*. New York: Garland, 1991. Print.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. *Wife*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1975. Print.
- Nahal, Chaman. *Feminism in Indian English Fiction, Indian Women Novelists* (Ed.), R.K. Dhwan, Prestige Books, New Delhi, 1971. Print.
- Rajeshwar, M. “*Sado-masochism as a Literary Device in Wife.*” *The Fiction Bharati Mukherjee*. Ed. R.K. Dhwan. New Delhi: Prestige Book, 1996. Print.
- Rustomiji-Kerns, Roshni ``*Expatriates, Immigrants and Literature: Three South –Asian Women Writers.*” *The Massachusetts Review*. 29.4 (Winter1988). Print.
- Sandler, Linda “*Violence as a Device for problem Solving.*” *Saturday Night* (October, 1975). Print.
- Sathupati, Prasanna. Sree. “*Psychotic Violence of Dimple in Wife.*” *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee*.Op. Cite. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakraborty. “*Can, the Subaltern Speak?*” *Marxist Interpretations of Culture*.Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Macmillan Education, Basingstolee, 1988. Print.