

THE NEGATIVE SIDE OF MARRIAGE IN BHARTI MUKHERJEE'S *WIFE*

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Abstract

Life after marriage for an Indian girl is not as smooth as it seems. This paper will highlight the challenges faced by the protagonist of Bharti Mukherjee's *Wife*, Dimple Dasgupta, who migrates to the United States with her husband Amit Basu. Her incompatibility with her husband, his inability in giving her moral and emotional support resulting in her feeling of alienation and isolation, her struggles in communicating with the natives of the host country ultimately leads her to mental instability, violence, murder and suicide. This paper focuses on the negative side of a traditional Indian arranged marriage through the psyche of a traditional Indian wife, Dimple, who migrates to the US with her husband Amit with hopes and dreams of a happy life.

Edward Said has described exile as, "Solitude experienced outside the group; deprivation felt at not being with others in the communal habitation (Said 359)" In his "reflections to exile" he has described an expatriate as a person initially going through painful loss of a "native place, tradition and family" (Said 359). This feeling further develops into a negative state of mind of "not belonging" which is solved by joining immigrant groups, ultimately resulting in a desire to create a world of one's own and one's own identity. All these changes greatly affect the expatriate's psyche.

In the patriarchal society of India, the birth of a girl child is not a reason for celebration. A girl is called 'Parayadhan' meaning 'another's property'. Since childhood, the girl is brought up with the intention of preparing her mentally and emotionally to be a good wife and daughter in law. Her parents start collecting gold and money for her dowry from the time she is born. Education is also provided to the girl because educated girls get good grooms. Because of all these preparations since childhood, the girl dreams of a supportive husband who will stand by her in fulfilling her dreams and aspirations, give her freedom to make personal and professional choices and treat her as an equal. She has expectations from her in laws that they will treat her with the same love, respect and care as they treat their son. As she has been told since childhood that she is just a guest in her parental home and her real home is her husband's home, the girl grows up expecting to fulfill all her aspirations after marriage as a wife and daughter in law in a house she can call her own domain. The protagonist Dimple in Bharti Mukherjee's *Wife* imagines her ideal man quite differently and hopes her future husband will fit this description,

She borrowed a forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips, eyes and chin from a body builder and shoulder's ad, the stomach and legs from a trousers ad and put the ideal man and herself in a restaurant on Park Street or by the side of a pool at a five-star hotel. He wore blue bathing trunks, there was no ugly black hair on his back and shoulder blades as he leaped feet first into the pool, while she stood on the edge in a scarlet sari with a gold border, behind wraparound sunglasses, and trailed her toes in water. (Mukherjee 23)

The novel is initiated by Dimple's efforts to secure a husband and escape from her parental home. She goes through a series of beauty treatments and workouts for the perfect figure and beautiful skin. She is highly influenced by the glamour magazines and lifestyle of socialites and hopes to live the same kind of life after her marriage. Dimple is a university student, fluent in English and is portrayed as a modern Indian woman, but her attitude towards her premarital life is a dress rehearsal for the life after her marriage. She considers marriage as a license for being legally sexual and free to make her own choices, have her own house and lead a life of candle light dinners, romance and parties, the kind of life she always craved for. Her dream of marrying a neurosurgeon is shattered when her father chooses an engineer for her. But she still hopes to get adjusted to his looks and career and maybe also accept and love him. The opening lines of the novel gives us an idea about Dimple's thoughts,

Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neuro-surgeon but her father was looking for engineers in matrimonial ads... She fantasized about young men with moustaches, dressed in spotless white, peering into open skulls. (Mukherjee 3)

An Indian woman's psyche after migration to the US with her husband is explored in Bharti Mukherjee's *Wife*. The protagonist Dimple is married to an engineer of her father's choice who finds her less intelligent to cope with the American Society. She feels trapped in her house and goes through a sense of alienation and isolation in the new land. There is a conflict between recreating of her own self, her status as wife and her identity in the small immigrant society she is allowed to socialize in, by her husband. The members of the small immigrant group treat her as an unintelligent person, constantly advising her on her lifestyle and interfering in her daily routine life as a housewife. She has to bear the criticism of the middle class gender biased Indian Society along with the racial discrimination of the American Society. Beside this her personal life is also shattered as she is unable to interact with her husband- physically, emotionally or as a friend. For Dimple, a man without a job or a strong financial status is no man at all. Amit initially does not have a job and when he finds one, it's not the kind of job which Dimple expected her husband should have.

She is unable to look up to her husband in the traditional way as he does not have the qualities she believed a husband should possess. His male ego does not allow him to permit Dimple to go to night school as other Americanized wives do (Mukherjee 69).

The distance between Dimple and Amit increased day by day leading to their interactions with each other in monosyllables. She goes through a period where she feels invisible- socially and culturally. She only feels visible when she has to perform some customs to uphold the Indian traditions expected of an Indian wife. For Amit, Dimple's identity is as his 'wife' who is married to him for the purpose of taking care of his house, adapt to life with him in America without becoming too Americanized and be a good traditional Bengali wife upholding all Indian customs and traditions expected of her. He has no interest in her thoughts, feelings or aspirations and does not care or bother to find out her expectations from him as a husband. Dimple's life as a 'wife' is limited to her husband's exit at 9:30 in the morning and entry into the house at 6:15 in the evening. As described in *Wife*,

He had never voted. He was ticklish just above the knees. He liked trams but did not like buses. Onions made him belch. At age sixteen he had written five poems. Those details had not seemed important before, but now she felt it helped explain the man who strode out of the building every morning at nine-thirty and wouldn't be back until six-fifteen. (Mukherjee 72)

Mukherjee has directed the theme of *Wife* towards the expectations and limitations which men impose upon their immigrant wives and also on the husband's dominance on his wife's thought process, effecting her psyche very negatively. Dimple is not able to balance her traditional Indian way of life and her life in the American society. She is frustrated due to the confinement in home and nostalgia of her home country. She is not able to "identify herself in American Society" (Mukherjee 121). Dimple's privacy, body and sexuality in India has been replaced by new meaning attached to her color, language and gender. She becomes more and more engrossed in daily soap operas, glamour magazines and lives of Indian film stars and socialites and curses her own married life. She even gets addicted to the crime stories in newspapers which used to scare the initially.

She and her traditional lifestyle as an Indian Bengali wife is ridiculed and looked down upon by her Indian acquaintances. She is shocked with the statements related to sexism, crime in day care centers and exploitation at workplace by white American feminists. She is unable to share her feelings and experiences with her husband as she is unable to connect with him emotionally or physically. She starts craving for an outlet to fill the emotional void in her. Dimple gets involved in a relationship with an American, Milt Glasser due to her lack of communication, her need for emotional attachment and interaction.

Amit had no idea how close she had come to betraying him completely and not just paying the price for too much fear and loneliness. He never thought of such things, never thought how hard it was for her to keep quiet and smile though she was falling apart like a very old toy that been played with something quite roughly, by children who claimed to love her. (Mukherjee 211-212).

This extramarital relationship is against her traditional morals, ethics and upbringing. For her, this relationship is an escape from the psychological and emotional turmoil she's going through in her marriage and social life. For the first time in the U.S., she's able to express herself. She is appreciated by Milt for her skills of housekeeping etc. Milt does all that she had expected her husband would do for her. She is able to open up in American society and understand her worth, status and create a self-image in the new land without changing her original image of herself. But Dimple's traditional upbringing brought about the feeling of guilt in her of betraying her husband. Bharti Mukherjee has described Dimple's life as a "dying bonfire" (Mukherjee 14). Brinda Bose claims the following in her essay on the identities of Mukherjee's female protagonists:

Ultimately, it is not the traditional role models that [Mukherjee's women] reject, but the fact that they can no longer reconcile the models to their circumstances. What drives them to react with violence, then, is their frustration at other people's inability to understand their changing needs and desires, now that they are no longer confined to the social and cultural patterns of their past (Bose 57-8)

Her loneliness and lack of support from her husband makes her an addict of TV programs and newspapers focusing on stories of love murders, deaths and frustration in love. The positive side of Dimple's relationship with Milt is that it gives her the courage to voice her emotions which makes her attitude rebellious with Amit and she stops being the docile and obedient wife

she used to be. Instead she challenges him, answers back and brings out her sensual nature. She blames her husband's age as one ingredient which instigates his orthodox behavior and curbs her freedom. Her addiction to television led her to relate to the life in the soap operas and find solutions to her problems in them. She loses her mental balance as she starts fantasizing about murder and sex in her imaginary life. She gets mixed up in her real life and imaginary life.

If it had not been for the project assessor... she might have been sleeping with Milt on a regular basis, like some wives on soap operas, leading a double life and nearing a bad end. (Mukherjee 211).

She comes to the conclusion that her sad state is due to her husband and her marriage. She feels that she has been betrayed in marriage as she did not receive anything she aspired and dreamed about. To escape from depression, madness and cultural alienation she decides that her only solution to live is by killing the reason for all her troubles, her husband Amit. She finally kills him brutally with a kitchen knife. Her demonic act is made more evil because of her insane attitude.

She said very loudly to the knife that was redder now than it had even been when she had chopped chicken and mutton with it in the same kitchen and the same counter. "I wonder if Leni can make a base for it; she's supposed to be very clever with her fingers." (Mukherjee 213).

For Dimple, a man with no job is no man at all. A marriage without candlelight dinners, romance, parties, freedom and cocktail parties etc. is no marriage for her. Her mental imbalance compels her to believe that she was happier and better off without being married and violent thoughts are dominant in her mind which is further fueled by TV soap operas and newspaper. Her madness is prominent in her thoughts after she stabs in to death and later commits suicide. She is so upset with her marriage that to get rid of the seven vows she stabs him seven times.

She stabs him seven times, symbolically, in apparent repudiation of the Hindu marriage bond signified by the seven ritual steps taken by the couple at the time of the marriage. (Mukherjee 213-214).

In *Wife*, Bharti Mukherjee has confronted personal and social violence through the protagonist Dimple Dasgupta. Dimple loses her mental balance because she is an expatriate, living in a society which does not give her room for adjustment or growth. Because of the feelings of alienation, loneliness, isolation and depression, she loses the last bit of confidence left in her for survival. This novel is the heart wrenching pain of a girl whose arranged marriage puts an end to her relationship with her hometown, patriarchal family, native culture and home country. This novel is a unique work of fiction due to the vivid description of the protagonist's psyche before and after her marriage, justifying the gradual growth of alienation, isolation, sense of non-belonging, leading to violence, insanity, murder and suicide, thus highlighting the negative side of a traditional Indian arranged marriage.

Work Cited:

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