

**Trauma of Expatriation: A Phenomenological Analysis of Bharati Mukherjee's
*Wife***

Mrs. M. Renuka¹

Ph.D Research Scholar (Part Time), Department of English, Government Arts
College (Autonomous), Kumbakonam – 612002, (Affiliated to Bharathidasan
University, Tiruchirappalli - 620024), Tamilnadu, India.

maharenu9944@gmail.com

Dr. C.N. Annadurai²

Associate Professor & Research Advisor, Department of English, Government Arts
College (Autonomous), Kumbakonam – 612002, (Affiliated to Bharathidasan
University, Tiruchirappalli - 620024), Tamilnadu, India.

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Abstract

This paper ventures to veer out the expatriate sensibility in Mukherjee's *Wife*. Her style even bears a stamp of expatriation due to cross-cultural conflict. *Wife* is about displacement and alienation because Dimple, the protagonist, has psychological claustrophobia and the negative inclinations that emerge from that circumstance. She is caught in a of conflict between American culture and society and the conventional constraints placed on an Indian wife, between a feminist urge to be forceful and independent and the requirement that an Indian wife be obedient and self-effacing. In her early years as an expatriate in America, Dimple fights two wars against imperialization at once since, as someone who comes from a different world, her own identities are called into question, necessitating a re-visioning and re-defining right away. Although the exercise is aggressive, powerful, and joyous in its mainstream movement, the echoes at the margins valorize the fears of expatriation. Therefore, the moments of change/transformation and reincarnation are significant.

Keywords: Expatriation, Feminist, Pain, Trauma, Culture

Bharati Mukherjee, an immigrant writer from the Third World - India, is undoubtedly a strong voice of the Indian diaspora. Her literature focuses on the psychological investigation of immigrants in America. She has illustrated the issues and difficulties they face as a result of their various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These immigrants from various cultures aspire fervently to fit into the culture of the

country they have chosen to live in. With remarkable understanding, she has outlined their goals, challenges, estrangement, sorrow, and trauma.

The second novel of Mukherjee, *Wife*, was published in 1975, explores a more nuanced aspect of the subject of intercultural strife. The focus of the story is on debilitating, corrosive influence of an alien culture, on a fragile self. The situation of the novel's protagonist makes clear how a rapid transfer from one's own culture to an alien one causes a kind of "cultures shock" that ultimately results in the disintegration of that person's self. The novel "in its depiction of the central character's alienation and depression, articulates a bleak vision of an immigrant woman's failure to assimilate into Western culture" (Bharati Mukherjee's "American Dreamer," 2).

According to Mukherjee, who revealed the inspiration for this novel in one of her published comments, the idea for it came to her by accident while she was in Calcutta in 1974, where she had returned after a seven-year absence and was spending a year on sabbatical with her American husband Clark Blaise. A visiting professor from Columbia University had asked her, "What do Bengali girls do between the age of eighteen and twenty-one?" (*Days and Night in Calcutta*, 29) Mukherjee was inspired to write this novel while she was still living in Toronto and dealing with various forms of humiliation brought on by racial prejudices and discrimination because she had already witnessed the plight of the Bengali wives in Calcutta. This anger was combined with her own bitterness and frustrations as an immigrant from India living in an intolerant race-conscious Canadian. Because of this, she acknowledged in one of her interviews that writing *Wife* "was a very painful novel" for her and later called the novel "wounding."

The story of a woman who is caught between two cultures and aspires to a third, made-up world is told in the novel. The very few novels - *Wife* is one of them - that successfully blend creativity, humour, and culture. In "Expatriates, Immigrants and Literature," Roshin Rustomji views Dimple's situation as a clash between two cultural traditions. She believes that when Dimple encounters a culture, she loses her sanity; "that she fails to comprehend and which refuses to make room for her. Because of this she feels intensely lonely and isolated" (608). She weaves her dreams of sex and violence into her imagined existence in an effort to fill the emptiness. Her concern about criminals and bunglers on the loose makes her irritability even worse. She is a complete resident alien due to her inability to adjust and degree of displacement. Thus, Dimple's circumstance clearly illustrates the effects of the immigrant situation of displacement.

The central character of *Wife* is Dimple, a middle-class married Bengali woman who moves to New York from Calcutta. The authentic Indian tradition of storytelling is captured in the novel's opening. The opening line is simple - "Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon" (Jasbir Jain's "Foreignness of Spirit," 18), is quite revealing and at once sets the scene that anticipates something unnatural. The profession of neurosurgeon seems really odd to Dimple Dasgupta. Mukherjee purposefully gave the protagonist the name "Dimple," and the epigraph of the novel, in which she quotes the dictionary definition of "Dimple" as "any slight surface depression," makes her intentions clear. It is clear from the outset that Dimple is significantly different from other girls. She is always contemplating about getting married since she believes it to be a blessing in disguise that will grant her independence, fortune, and complete happiness.

Dimple viewed single life as a practise run for married life. She had already become anxious and excessively prone to colds, coughs, and headaches due to the years of waiting. Even though she is only twenty, she regrets the squandered years that hang over her like a chill, making her eyes squint with caution and her spine hunch slightly. As the weeks and months passed and two weddings occurred further down the block, she was unable to stop wondering. She even reports experiencing chest pain and needs to be admitted.

At last Dimple's father, Mr. Dasgupta finds a suitable match for her - Amit Kumar Basu who is a Consultant Engineer. In Kenya, his employment application is still pending. He has already submitted immigration petitions to the US and Canada. Dimple is overjoyed about her marriage and spends a lot of money shopping. After being married, she visits Amit at his home. Although the Basus are wonderful folks, their home is neither particularly roomy or appealing. Dimple thus does not feel at ease there right away. Her mother-in-law and sister-in-law are not popular with her. The pressure of living up to others' expectations is what she finds intolerable. Dimple, however, believes that all of these issues are only short-term and that they will be resolved once immigration is approved. Though she and her spouse frequently discuss the upcoming international vacation "Thought of living in Africa or North America terrified her" (17).

Dimple has lived in a fantasy world that she has created. But as she faces the harsh facts of life, she becomes extremely distressed, and her fantasies begin to crumble one by one. She believed that delaying marriage was preferable to actually getting married. She starts to despise everyone and everything. In the days she was waiting, her friend Paramita Roy, also known as Pixie, had brought magazines for her. She had seen in those magazines how "young marrieds" were constantly visiting

decorators and choosing “their” hue, particularly the colours for their bedrooms. “Being free and expressing yourself” (31) was considered to be the best aspect of marriage. Dimple believes that getting married has deprived her of all of her carefully cultivated romantic fantasies. Dimple does “not want to carry any relics from her old life” (42) since doing so will cause her to be reminded of her disappointments and annoyances from the past. She considers her pregnancy to be one of the relics and mulls over how to get rid of it. She finally makes the awful choice to use skipping ropes to put a stop to it. The only person who can achieve this is Dimple. She rarely gives her pregnancy any further attention after killing it. She never expresses regret for the awful act of taking a potential human life. She should have experienced an emotional explosion, but she remained calm and detached.

When Dimple receives word, that Amit would be moving to the United States, her joy knows no bounds. She is well-prepared for it. She is very meticulous and makes sure she doesn't miss everything necessary for a new life. She has the impression that she is being released from the arrogant domestic servitude. On the eve of their departure, Pixie throws a lavish party and invites largely members of the media. There Dimple meets Ratna Das, a middle-aged media snob whose wife she is who has no interest in America.

Dimple flies into New York in the second part of the novel. Finally, the long-awaited day of migration arrives, and Dimple and Amit land at Kennedy Airport. Jyoti Sen, Amit's former classmate from the IIT, Kharagpur, welcomes them. He discusses the triple-murder case, which is the buzz of the town, as they go. In this case, a man killed three people, including an ice-cream vendor, for the plain reason that the vendor did not have a chocolate ice-cream cone. Amit is unconcerned with what is happening outside the automobile. Dimple is excited and a little terrified at the same time when she travels to the Sens and inquires about work chances in America. when she has never gone to a city larger than Calcutta, the beauty of New York terrifies her.

Many professionals, including thousands of doctors, engineers, and managers, relocate to western nations with the express intent of earning big salaries and eventually returning home to lead a privileged and happy life. They do recognise that the nation of adoption is only a temporary residence, and they make an effort to pass the time by maintaining their individual identities as well as their own cultural and religious values. This is supported by Jyoti's straightforward confession: “If it weren't for the money, I'd go back tomorrow. This is too much the rat race for a man like me” (55). It is not simple to find work in America, especially “if you're Indian” (12). If one is given the chance, it is exceedingly challenging to maintain it. There, one must put up with many forms of exploitation and humiliation without ever

venting. Amit learns from Jyoti Sen all the skills necessary for success in his line of work.

When Dimple attends a grand party at Vinod Khanna's house, she sees Indian-Americans doing admirably. Since leaving Calcutta, Dimple has not had the chance to encounter so many Indians. A "little India," in her opinion, had come to life. People from many states, castes, and creeds, including the Sens, Mehra, Khannas, and Bhattacharyas, were speaking in a common tongue. Everyone expresses contempt for Americans while praising everything about India, including its culture, cuisine, and customs. Americans are considered to be "dirty people" by Indians since they only take a bath once a week and frequently apply perfume. Mrs Bhattacharya is baffled by their decision to wash their clothes in the same washbasin they use to spit in and wash their dishes. Jyoti has nothing but admiration for the sense of cohesion among Indians living overseas.

Amit is clearly frustrated right now because he has not been able to find a job yet. His opinions are hardly ever taken into consideration at parties. He loses confidence and grows more and more desperate as the days go by. This soured his relationship with Dimple, and as a result, focusing on trivial concerns became the norm. Dimple, however, assists Meena Sen with home duties and spends her free time either reading newspapers or watching television. But Dimple is constantly terrified; nothing frightens her. She is terrified of the police because all she hears is about murder, smuggling in the building's basement and other crimes: "She was scared of the policemen: they just did not look inoffensive, like the ones back home" (74).

Dimple has the chance to interact with both Indians and Native Americans at social functions and observe their actions. She first encounters Bijoy Mullick and his infamous wife Ina Mullick in this location. Sens and others find this Indian woman repulsive. She is more American than most Americans and wears trousers and mascara, which explains why. She flirts, drinks, smokes a pack a day, and attends night classes. She even has a unique theory regarding immigrants, according to her husband.

Women are hardly ever allowed to discuss emancipation and equality in patriarchal India. The male members largely determine the fate of the female members. Sens has frequently advised Amit to keep Dimple far from Ina so that she won't be influenced by her wild beliefs. Amit is prompted by this warning to stop Dimple from taking Ina's drink and instead speaks for her in the following way: "She does not like alcoholic beverages... she does not even like coke" (77). The Western feminists who anticipated a direct response from Dimple find this astounding. Amit and Dimple first meet Marsha Mookerji and Prodosh Mookerji, who will be their

future beneficiaries, at this celebration. Milt Lasser, Marsha's brother, is a bit of a mystery to Dimple. Though "Dimple could not follow the way he talked, the things he talked about and the amazing leaps between his conversation," (83), she is immediately drawn to his tall and lanky nature as well as his polite manners. Milt turns out to be crucial to Dimple's life, as we see later.

After realising she was duped into marriage and that a useless spouse like Amit would not be able to assist her in realising her dream life, Dimple grows more and more dissatisfied and dejected over time. She develops sleeplessness as a result of her inability to bear his snoring any longer. She is now annoyed by Amit's habits, which she had previously overlooked in Calcutta.

American English and the American system disgust Dimple. Even little things might intensify it. The self-service lifts terrify her to operate. Dimple believes that a life surrounded by those who do not understand Durga Puja is impossible. In India, Dimple had never been alarmed by the friendly-looking police officers she saw, but in her new surroundings in America, the situation has completely changed. In "Images of Woman in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels," Enakshi Choudhury avers,

She is scared of self-service elevators, of policemen, of gadgets, of appliances. She does not want to wear Western clothes as she thinks she would be mistakenly taken for a Puerto Rican. She does not want to lose her identity but feels isolated, trapped, alienated, marginalised. (84)

Dimple could confide in Meena Sen about her personal concerns in Queens, but she feels alone in Greenwich. Here, her despair shows up in a number of different ways. Even though she frequently tries to write to Pixie in her mind, she is unsuccessful. After getting married, a woman's husband, with whom she shares her very soul, becomes her closest friend. Dimple, however, is unable to do that; instead, she keeps everything from Amit. Dimple has anticipated some problem in the American setting when she comes to this city because Sen is a part of any fresh beginning. But she never envisioned being "strained like this beyond endurance" in her wildest dreams:

She had expected pain when she had come to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning, and in the sweet structures of that new life had allotted pain a special place. But she had not expected her mind to be strained like this, beyond endurance. She had not anticipated inertia, exhaustion, endless indecisiveness. (115)

Dimple occasionally considers suicide when the loneliness becomes intolerable. She seems to be fascinated by anything that is dark, nasty, scary, or gory;

phrases like murder, suicide, and mugging intrigue her. Her methods for escaping life are fantastical like television commercials. She is the only one she cannot trust but the media. She reportedly thought her own body was strangely alien, filled with hatred, hostility, and an obsessive desire to hurt people, yet it was also practically weightless and airborne.

Dimple is eager to make amends with America as the novel moves closer to its conclusion. Her spirit rebels, and she starts living a different manner. She begins hanging out with Ina and Milt, dons Marsha's trousers, and thus takes advantage of all the forbidden freedom. She seduces Milt, but she does not tell Amit about it. She wears Marsha's tinted sunglasses every time she leaves the house. But after this outing, she is even more perplexed. She is unable to distinguish between what she sees on television and what she actually goes through. She develops anxiety. She is now an alienated entity dealing with what are thought to be the consequences of estrangement.

Dimple's depression gets worse as time goes on. She starts to understand that "her life was slow, full of miscalculations" (178). Amit observes Dimple's exterior changes and attributes them to "culture shock." Even his offer to take her to Calcutta falls short of his expectations. Dimple starts out by considering killing her husband. Both internal and external violence exist. Dimple now demonstrates her inability to tell the difference between what she thinks and what she watches on television. She is fascinated by the thought of killing her husband.

Amit's lack of excess is his fault; he upheld the immigrant qualities of caution and cunning. He fails to capture Dimple's breakdown emotionally. Dimple's problem is that she drifts away from reality. She was guilty of seducing Milt and concealing it from Amit. She has trouble sleeping, develops a sleepwalking habit, and ultimately kills Amit without giving the decision any thought. Seven times she is stabbed by Dimple. Dimple seems to have cut her ties to her spouse. She can only assert herself in this way. Dimple's terrible behaviour, according to some commentators, has nothing to do with "cultural shock" and she is not a victim of "expatriation" rather, she is "a victim of her own neurotic sensibility fed on popular advertisement fantasies." According to K.S. Narayan Rao, who approaches it from a particular angle:

The novel raises an important question: was the Indian wife happier in India with her limited freedom and greater docility, or does she achieve happiness in her painful search for more individual freedom and in the process of maturing? ("Review of *Wife*," 475)

Dimple's problem is that she aspires to be the ideal Bengali woman—passive,

discrete, and adaptable - but she cannot help but be drawn to the glitz and glitter Bollywood films set in Bombay provide as an alternative to the established clichés.

The source of Dimple's issue is not external to her. No matter where she goes, she will always be a foreigner because she is the source of her own problems. She has a psychological condition. She is essentially a psychiatric case study of a nearly crazy person whose immigration issue has led her to extremes. The displaced immigrant scenario is of utmost significance to Mukherjee. A person's separation from their environment always results in a more acute feeling of identity and a self-consciousness about their cultural origins.

To sum-up, Mukherjee's *Wife* handles issues pertaining to expatriates. We have sympathy for the character Dimple as she deals with the difficult issues surrounding immigrant conflict. She like mirror images reflecting her own experiences as a woman stuck in the cultural conundrum brought on by the clash of two cultures. *Wife's* interpretation suggests that it is a novel about and about loneliness. Dimple goes on a voyage that is cultural in nature. Dimple tries her hardest to erase her identity in the foreign country, but she suffers from cross-cultural maladjustment.

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