

DIASPORIC EXPERIENCES IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *WIFE*

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Abstract:

Identity crisis is one of the prominent issues in the post-colonial literature. Indian English novels deal with the problems that are raised due to multiculturalism and intercultural interactions. Cultural assimilation, in-betweenness, and hybridity generate the identity crisis. Man is known as a social animal who needs home, love of parents, friends, and relatives. But when the man is homeless, he loses the sense of belongingness and suffers a sense of insecurity or identity crisis. Cultural displacement occurs generally after cultural assimilation. Constant interaction with the host culture puts an immigrant into a dilemma. He/she fails to decide on the appropriate culture and finally comes up with a hybrid culture. The present research paper focuses on how Dimple lacks inner strength and resources still she tries to cope with new culture. The present paper gives a brief review of how cultural displacement or dislocation causes new identities through a rigorous path.

Keywords: diasporic, identity crisis, hybridity, cultural assimilation, displacement, etc.

Indian diasporic women writers have made significant contributions to the field of English novels. Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian-born American novelist, occupies a prominent place. Within a short period, she published six fictional works, two short collections, a non-fictional work, and some literary essays. Her fictional works include *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave it to Me* (1997), and *Desirable Daughters* (2002). Bharati Mukherjee has generally concentrated on immigrant experiences. Her protagonists face the identity crisis and sometimes overcome and sometimes succumb to the distressing experience.

Identity crisis or search for identity has received an impetus in the post-colonial literature. Indian English fiction deals at length with the problems, rising due to multi-culturalism and intercultural interactions. Aristotle a famous Greek philosopher said, “Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual.” But when the man leaves his house, he loses the sense of belongingness and thus suffers from an identity crisis. Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Wife* deals with the problem of the immigrant psyche and displays the variety of responses possible. The novel examines the problem in depth and helps us understand the dimensions of the immigrant’s psychological and emotional condition.

Bharati Mukherjee, an immigrant writer, projects in her work the cultural displacement faced by immigrants and the impact that is left on them. Her novel *Wife* projects the different situations the immigrant characters face, the problems they overcome, the adjustments they make, and the feeling of isolation. One of the themes of the novel is Dimple’s predicament as an Indian immigrant’s wife in North America. Moreover, the novel tracks the violence building up inside and all around her in the North American landscape until she is driven to murder her husband.

The novel *Wife* deals with the theme of the immigrant experiences of the first and second generations. The novel focuses on the diasporic experiences of first and second-generation immigrants. Diasporic experiences include the quest for identity, language as a barrier, assimilation, alienation, cultural conflict, identity crisis, existential dilemma, name and identity, and nostalgia. It focuses on the life of a middle-class woman who migrates from Calcutta to New York. After a ten-year stay in Canada, Bharati Mukherjee returned to her native country in 1973 and encountered an India that she had never expected: a world far less innocent than the one she remembered.

The novel *Wife* was written during Bharati Mukherjee’s stay in Canada. It deals with the immigrant experience of the Indians and the disillusionment that follows it. The novel is divided into three parts and each part tells the story of a middle-class Bengali girl who marries an

engineer and later migrates to New York. It depicts the female protagonist's dilemma of rootlessness and her incapacity to belong. The novelist deals with the identity crisis and depicts the mental suffering through which the protagonist, Dimple Basu passes. It is observed that Dimple is an extremely immature girl who lives in a romantic world. She dreams of marrying a neurosurgeon as she hopes that marriage will bring her freedom from all patriarchal bondage. As she imagines:

“Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love.”
(1975:3)

Dimple always suffers from an inferiority complex since the beginning of the novel. She is very much worried about her,

“sitar-shaped body and rudimentary breasts. Would the now-inevitable engineer- she visualized in starched khaki pants and dark glasses, still mustached, on a half-built bridge directing laborers-be disappointed that she wasn't bosomy and fair like a Bombay starlet? She thought of breasts as having destinies of their own, ruining marriages or making fortunes.”
(1975:4)

The novel *Wife* is divided into three parts. Each part deals with a particular phase in Dimple's life. The first one is about her premarital expectations and desires, and her subsequent marriage with a mechanical engineer, Amit Basu. The second part of the novel describes her expected beginnings of a new life in America. The third and the final phase describe her total disillusionment of married life and a complete relapse into her neurotic psyche and murder of her husband.

The character Dimple is caught in the dilemma of tensions between American culture and society and the traditional constraints surrounding an Indian wife. Her frustrations are so intensified that she thinks of killing Amit. She seduces Milt, wears Marsha's pants, goes out with Ina and enjoys all sorts of freedom. Thus, she turns a rebellion and violates all stereotyped behaviour of Indian womanhood. Eventually, she kills Amit, stabbing him seven times and making herself free from the marriage bond. She separates herself from the image of

Sita and feels that her life has been devoted only to pleasing others. Her illegitimate relationship with Milt Glasser seems her attempt to find an identity in America.

Bharati Mukherjee seems to send a message that if one has to assimilate oneself into the mainstream culture of the adopted land, one should forget one's past. Ina Mullick summarizes how the Indian immigrants assimilate themselves into the adopted culture. She says that it takes immigrants a year to get India out of their system. However, the protagonist of the novel *Wife*, Dimple Basu, finds the solution to her problems only by murdering her husband. In Nagendra Kumar's *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee- A Cultural Perspective*, he says- "Thus, it is America which intensifies her confusion and turns the violence inside out and she ends up as a murderess".

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* shows the dilemma that is faced by the Indian woman who is defined by a patriarchal culture. In India, it has been found that marriages are arranged by parents. The husband has an authority over his wife. The wife has to obey her husband. On the other hand, in the United States, Dimple experienced both her own and borrowed cultures: the self-contained domestic world of Indians in the States and the sophisticated parties of the more Americanized Indians in Manhattan held by her friends.

The character, Dimple believed that she would be free to experience a different life. She finds her existence in an undefined social space that reinforces her indigenous cultural moorings. She is most reminded of her Indianness among the Americanized Indians. When she met Ina Mullick, she saw a liberated housewife who was more American than Americans. Mukherjee shows that Dimple loses her sanity and is affected by the sense of alienation from her Indian and American culture. Her sense of loss is mainly heightened by her seduction by Amit's friend. Her madness was the peak of her emotions and it can be seen through the denial of her identity as a victim of cultural displacement and patriarchal discourse.

In this way, the present research paper presents the analysis of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* and highlights the diasporic experiences through the characters like Dimple and Amit Basu. It has been observed that Dimple's identity is due to her being in exile. It is also noticed that Dimple is an escapist and lost in her private world of fantasy. Her inferiority complex compounded by the cultural crisis leads to a catastrophic end. Dimple's self-alienation

aggravates her frustrations and she finds herself at crossroads. Moreover, her inability to communicate with her husband Amit further intensifies her alienation in an alien culture. The lack of communication eventually results in a psychic defect and the protagonist, Dimple, begins to suffer from neurotic symptoms. Eventually, she murders her husband. It has been also observed that Amit is a projection of her neurotic self which she wants to annihilate and hence she commits the act of murder. The murder of Amit is an assertion of her American identity.

To conclude, it is clear that Dimple is neither of India nor of America but a stunned wanderer between these two worlds. Neither does she belong to the T.V. world nor the world of reality but keeps on shuttling between the two identities. She is yet to release herself from the hallucinatory world, she is yet to get out of the schizophrenic self. Dimple's quest is a quest for identity. In other words, it is found that the protagonist of *Wife* finds solutions to her problems only by murdering her husband. Thus, it is America which intensifies her confusion and turns the violence inside out and she ends up as a murderess.

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