

BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S WIFE: A PSYCHO-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

Wife, Bharati Mukherjee second Nobel falls into the category of the work by "native alien and expatriate novelists and gets concerned with a woman's life as it enforce itself in search for self-realization and freedom. Dimple, the heroine moves from maidenhood to marriage, and from Calcutta to New York, carrying her shifting load of dreams and hopes from one place to another, unrealized and unfulfilled or realized in a manner she had least anticipated. From the feminist angle it is in line with writing like Mupassant's A Women's Life and Elizabeth Gaskell's Wives and Daughters. It reminds one of Flaubert's Madame Bovary and Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, works which examine feminine attempts to understand and redefine women's role in society and try to defy the limitations of the role which has been handed down to women through tradition and society. The present paper is an attempt to examine the backdrop against which Bharati Mukherjee has set Dimple's life and the psycho-cultural dimensions of her conflict. Each of the three parts of the novel helps to highlight the different aspects of the conflict she experiences as she moves from her rental home to that of her husband, and then from Queen to Manhattan leaving behind the 'little India' of the Sen's apartment, and finally as she moves from marriage to adultery. It becomes a conflict between her fantasy world and the reality of her life, and her withdrawal from human contact is paralleled at every step by an increasing reliance on the synthetic and commercial world, projected by the magazine and television until finally she is no longer able to distinguish between this projected world and the actuality.

Keywords: *Psycho-Cultural, Native Alien, Self-Realization, Commercial World.*

Introduction

The title *Wife* reveals Dimple's preoccupation with this role to the exclusion of all others, a role which as the novel progress, is viewed from various cultural and social angles. Traditionally the fulfillment of a woman's personality has been viewed in relation to her husband. A wife is viewed as a helpmeet, her role falling between that of a mother and a courtesan. Moulded and framed by society to please men and subdue their own ego, women have for centuries accepted this role both in the East and West, finding a final justification of their existence in motherhood. Constancy and devotion self-denial and self-sacrifice have been associated with feminine Glory in most literatures from Ruth to Sita. In India, the role of a woman is expected to perform, as almost as a monolithic structure from Kalidas to Premchand and even after. But within the tradition women have often try to test their strength and stretch the roll a little further to express themselves. In the sixties, however, this questioning of the traditional feminine role acquired the dimensions of a revolution and shook the very foundation of man-woman relationship and of family life. T. G. Atkinson, a feminist leader of New York compared the institution of marriage to that of slavery and the radical amongst the feminist advocated and abolition of all the distinction in dress, demeanor and personal adornment. It is but natural that such a moment should lead to a drastic change in the accepted cultural patterns and social practices. The protagonist of Mukherjee's *Wife*, Dimple Das Gupta, is a representative woman caught between the conflicting claim of tradition and liberation, a conflict which is accentuated, by the fact of Dimple's removal from her traditional background.

When the novel opens, the reader finds Dimple half-heartedly preparing for B.A. examination, and endlessly daydreaming about her future life. Her reveries are centered around film stars and their lavish world and round a handsome husband who will transform her very existence. Marriage, she believes will bring her freedom, love and fulfill her with passion. But none of these dreams is actualized when she finds herself married to Amit, who is neither very handsome nor very rich and who lives in a cramped flat with his mother and brother on Dr. Sharat Banerjee road. Marriage, instead of the hope for freedom

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brings her only more duties and obligations. It threatens the little identity she has, especially when her mother-in-law wants to change her name to Nandini. While outwardly Dimple falls into this role, inwardly she presents her on apparent docility and nurtures this resentment perhaps the only way of holding on to the remnants of her identity. In this mood Dimple seeks refuge in her fantasy world and spends her leisure time sitting in the balcony of her home trying to match eye, nose and her hair and create her ideal man.

Just dream world is reversed in reality; the traditional role of motherhood is reverse in her imagination. Pregnancy, when it comes, is viewed by her as a deformity, a fresh encroachment upon whatever freedom she has. It has alienated her as the home of her parents-in-law and the manner in which it takes her unawares, is unacceptable to her. With the preparations for the immigration already afoot, she is reluctant to carry this world into the future and motivated by the desire to make an absolutely fresh start, she induces an abortion. But life in New York also turns out to be very different from her expectations. While Amit is looking around for employment, they stay with the Sens in Queens, and had thought turn to other man. She wonders whether life would have been different for her if she had married Jyoti Sen and not Amit Basu. Later she finds herself attracted to Milt Glasser. These new ideas and possibilities for her in direct conflict with the training she had received prior to her marriage and the views which had been imposed upon her through precept and examples from the reading of women's magazines.

"Marriage is the song of life and we should all sing it otherwise the virtues of her culture will wither and fall off".

"marriage above all teacher's the virtues of sacrifice, responsibility and patience".

"Just as man has certain obligations to society, so the wife has obligations to her husband".

Frequent references are made to the legendary Sita, the ideal of womanhood, in the book. Sharing the burn victim's scream in the hospital, reminds her of Sita the ideal wife of Hindu legends, who walked through fire at her husband's request. Such pen and such royalty seemed reserved for married women. Dimple as a virgin longed to be like Sita, to be married and be glorified through marriage.

At a farewell party as she watches Ratna Das talk flirtatiously to a film producer it occurs to her:

Perhaps you could not be modern and intelligent and still be heroic. You had to choose between being Sita of the rounded hips who could saunter through fire and being Ratna Das who was, at that very moment, smile tolerantly at the heavy man and patting his heavy cheek.

The image of Sita pursues her even in America, where in the Sen's apartment a batik wall hanging portraying King Rama and his court and has short voluptuous Sita hip in pale orange flames, welcomes her reminding the Indian wife of her culture and moral ideal. Dimple's inner inability to accept the traditional mode of behavior results in her own individualized version of passive resistance. Her silent rebellion, her bouts of depression, her suicidal tendencies all merge with one another and become for Dimple a way of expressing herself negatively. These self-destructive tendencies are further encouraged by her life in New York, which on one hand is surfeited with media values and on the other age divided by distances and silences. Like Nalini in B. Rajan's *Too Long in the West*. Dimple is caught in the crossfire of American commercialism on the very third morning of arrival in New York.

As greener as Dimple is, she falls under the charm of Ina Mullick who is more American than Americans in her ways, though once was like Dimple, skinny and shy. Ina too is drawn to Dimple finding the old image of her own self reflected in Dimple. Ina confesses how she had felt terribly lonely in the beginning before being swept away in the Americans' stream. Ina's friend Milt Glasser attracts Dimple. At Manhattan when Ina offers her a drink, Dimple senses that Amit was waiting for her to decline the offer and give the right answer upholding Bengali womanhood, marriage and male pride:

The right answer 'I do not need stimulant to feel happy in my husband's presence.... my obligation is to my husband' seemed to dance before her eye as though it were printed on a card. It is at this party that she meets Masha who surprisingly is both beautiful and intelligent, and her brother Milt and feels attracted toward their world. This desire to move from one reality to another is strongly dominant in Dimple's personality, and Dimple and Amit soon move out to Bleeker Street in the village, 2 and apartment lent by Marsha Mookerjee a convenient place for Ina and Milt to drop in.

It is in this apartment of Marsha with a dozen of plants that America encloses on her consciousness and psychological streets become more manifest. Watching the television constantly comes to mean love and death, violence, mugging and murder. She broods in utter loneliness, plunges herself into what darkness and struggle losing hold on reality, living on the synthetic imagination of television and magazines. Images of corrosion haunt her in the apartment. The silence disturbs her:

She had expected pain as part of a new beginning but not expected her mind to be strained like this beyond endurance. She had not anticipated inertia, exhaustion, endless in-decisiveness. Had the man in the cheese cake shop not trapped her she would go for pain relievers should not be in in sunless room warring herself sick over footsteps in the hall and glassy eyes in the keyhole. Institutes would be strong and sane. In this mental state left to her on the 14th floor apartment she looks to Amit who is cautious and cunning like and expert. Barbed as a wife she is always bitterly comparing Amit to JyotiSen, Milt Glasserjivan to Johny Carson on T.V. and finds him disappointing.

She had acquired a sense of unachieved self in Calcutta when immigration had given her new for self-exploration, self-expression and a new identity. Milt Glasser, with his charm, frankness and versatility, now provides a new vision. She wonders if she loves Milt and what love is, but comes to feel that she is perhaps incapable of love. She suffers from insomnia, nightmares of intense violence and constantly contemplates various ways of committing suicide. Totally cut off from Amit, uprooted from Calcutta, she is left with America, but her dreams are no longer American. They are at times of Puerto Rican girl who can mug, stab and kill. Had deep depression and despair gradually leads to words thoughts of violence. She wonders" if minor irritation accumulated over decades could erupt into violence". Now she faces both intensity of feeling and desire for revenge. She feels if it had not assigned her Amit. She would have been a different woman. She might have been highly educated, talking intelligently e off of astrophysics and politics. These unsatisfied ambitions find a fulfillment in her dreams and fantasies, an escape fruit c ahead always resorted to:

Erotic fantasy begins to sneak into her mind. Male faces cricket stars, young cabinet ministers, heroes from novels. Her heart grew vulnerable and paper thin, transparent as butterflies wing. Her fantasies are sexual, but these are predominantly romantic, not physically as she herself realizes. When physical relationship becomes a reality, Dimple prefers to withdraw from it and move onto to the next imaginary goal. This tendency now in New York is further intensified, when wearing Marsha sunglasses makes her dream of the astronaut. She is very hot hunting the 'white whale' of her vision, one never to be realized. Like Emma Bovary, brought up in her middle class family, led away into a world of romance and dream, she is bound to you and into a chimera as Dimple feels:

Dimple felt hopeless and old. She wished Ina had stayed through civil always measurable when Ina stayed. Ina would have known how to cope with the disaster. And with the fear of disaster. But Ina could not have consoled her. That was the hateful thing about Ina; secret promised happiness independence love but no consolation. Then see panicked: her need to console it was so immense, so violent that it could only crush her. She tried to deflect its course. See read the backs of real boxes that promised FREE INSIDE! She ate two forkfuls of left over curried cauliflower before throwing up. But the panic was still there. Also the hate. Life should have treated her better, should have added and subtracted in different proportions so that it she was not left with chimera.

Letter, after and adulterous relationship up with Milt she became increasingly aware of her own limitations, of her failure "to recreate a new World in the limits of her apartment". Mentally going Amit's phrases, she finds herself poised on "the very brink of crisis". Her nakedness is real in more than one way and the colored glasses she persists in wearing can no longer help her evade the truth:

She was so much worse off than ever, lonelier, more cutoff from Amit from the Indians, left only with borrowed disguises. She felt like a shadow without feelings. Whatever she did no matter how coolly she planned it, would be wrong. It was getting harder for her to distinguish between what she had seen on TV and what she had imagined. The TV set was her only friend, undemanding. In this fantasy, Amit was a man from the ads and TV commercials- but he was nowhere in the apartment. At time she feels "as if a force was impairing her towards disaster, some monster had overtaken her body, a creature was serpentine curls and heaving bosom that would erupt indiscreetly throw one off Dimple's official leaving her Dimple Basu, spluttered like a bug on the living room wall and rug". She collapses in a terror when a neighbour pays her a visit seeking Ina in her apartment.

These psychosomatic disorders are the result of cultural changes which were gradual in the past but the "rapidity of technological and sociological changes in the modern Times results in environmental pressures and inner conflicts, agony and existential struggles". Henry James had ascribed the social vulnerability of women to the fact that they suffer more while transgressing social decorum. This latent tendency in Dimple mounts high in the American environment.

She goes through what Jean Rhys has described as:

The hard terror of psychological isolation the frightening vision of emotional alienation. There is a search for personhood that is felt. The abundance of comfortable life is heavy for anyone of imaginative temperament. There is no promise of happiness. He can only become a derelict or die.

Alone in Marsha's apartment, her thoughts Centre more and more on death, a condition which psychologist explains as a result of culture collision. Colemanwhile analyzing suicidal behavior writes:

Suicide as a kind of relief from the aversive live situation and are contemplated by women due to interpersonal relations, unfulfilled need, rage, hostility and revenge and frustration over rejection, to withdraw from the turmoil of relationship that is highly conflicting on which the individual feels dependent.

In an atmosphere of violence, sex and murder, macabre nightmares possess her and almost on the brink of insanity, see find and outlet for her repressed self in in bizarre dream of destruction. But there are no thrilling demolitions for her, only substitutions. After her intercourse with Milt, even he ceases to absorb her and comes to represent American with its violence, rape, mugging, murder and death. Perhaps she had visualized a romantic idealized relationship of a Gopi to Krishna which is not possible. Questioning social norm and values, revolting against the role of the wife, denouncing Sita, coming in collision with another culture she carries on experimenting with an alternative lifestyle. When her suffering becomes unbearable, she kills her husband with a kitchen knife.

Bharati Mukherjee has used various symbols to indicating the mental state of Dimple. Waiting to get married, feeling the weight of wasted years, she discovers dead baby lizard in her pillow case. After her marriage, lying in bed with Amit, she thinks again of the dead baby lizard in her pillow, expression of her feeling of resentment toward Amit. The coiled snake is associated with the sexual desires. As a mouse disturb her dream, she is smashes it with broomstick-transformed women in fury. The dead mouse look pregnant in a strangely swollen body. It is her anger against Amit, pregnancy and motherhood. Latter in Bleeker Street the mouse is Amit. Pixie present her with gold fish in a bowl, she flushes them in the toilet, visualizing herself as one of them. She is likened to a porpoise by Ina, a soft image and vulnerable culture. At the back of her mind, floats the image of herself as a child with scared knees and a pink taffeta frock. She appears vulnerable to the exposure of American culture.

At DrSarat Banerjee road, she wound a crow but surprised that a wounded crow could look so depressing. Looking at the ceiling, song it seemed against gravity, suggestive of her and Amit's relationship.

Images occur besides those of animals, to depict her life in America. There are plants which grow fungus and in spite of all care, die. A rhinoceros shaped astray is broken by Leni and this is the breaking off an era for her. Later in a nightmare, sea imagines her on brain in a plastic rhinoceros. There are pins and needles in the carpet as in her own life. Finally there is a decal left by a stranger who called on Dimple. The decal has a picture of Krishna. It is love she needs most. Life has been devoted to pleasing others not herself.

The gap between her two words- one of fantasy and the other of reality-cannot be bridged by any individual act of adjustment. It is perhaps not possible for her to do so even by an act of violence as she vainly attempt to do at the end as she directs the destructive tendencies outward and murder her husband while making memories of the violence which she has viewed on TV. Perhaps it is the final refuge of of insanity, aur perhaps it is an act which bridge the gap between fantasy and reality for it destroys both the world.

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