

Alienated Self: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's WIFE**Mythili, M.**, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. (Pursuing)

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Abstract: *Bharati Mukherjee, a versatile immigrant writer, born in a period of transition was a sensitive observant of the then socio-political condition. She is at her best when she draws on her experiences of India while writing with insight about America in which she now lives. She has oft been praised for her understated prose style and her ironic plot developments and witty observations. She considers her work a celebration of her emotions, and herself a representative of the writers of Indian Diaspora. The psyche of the Indian immigrants is the dominant concern of Bharati Mukherjee, who herself belongs to this class. The status quo of the immigrants in America and the traumas and travails they have to encounter is presented in a convincing mode. Her main theme obviously refers to the phenomenon of migration and the problems like alienation, struggle with identity, racism and various forms of discrimination etc. Hence, this paper throws light on the theme, the sense of alienation that Dimple, the protagonist of the novel Wife experiences. This paper also analyses how Dimple, caught in a gulf between the two contrasting worlds leads to her illusion, depression and finally her tragic decision of killing her husband.*

Key words: *alienation, depression, neurosis, psychic disintegration*

In Greek, the word Diaspora means dispersal or scattering of seeds. This word primarily used to refer to the dispersal of Jewish to Babylonia, came to be used to refer to the situation that involve the experiences of migration, expatriate workers, refugees, exiles, migrants and ethnic communities. Diasporic writing born out of the dialectic between displacement and relocation, belonging and alienation raises theoretical formulations which provide fresh perspective to creative writing. Bharati Mukherjee, one among the fascinating different, diasporic writers, stands apart by the virtue of representing immigrant issues.

Bharati Mukherjee's life is a story of exile, expatriation and dispossession that constitute her unique diasporic consciousness which is responsible for her creative expression. Therefore, her writings largely reflect her personal experience in cross-cultural boundaries. In her novels, she honestly put forth her different phases of life- from alienation in India and then in Canada to assimilation in USA.

Mukherjee's much acclaimed novel *Wife* was written during the phase of alienation in Canada. The novel *Wife* falls into the category of the modern novel as it presents an intense inner world of neurotic and solipsistic individual. Instead of trying to combine the freedom of the individual with tolerance for fellow beings, Bharati Mukherjee chooses to glorify the alienated individual.

The novel *Wife* stands apart as a unique fictional work by the virtue of its deep analysis into the heroine's psyche. It is about displacement and alienation. It tells the story of a young Bengali girl Dimple Dasgupta, who is portrayed as a feeble and irresolute woman. Even at the age of twenty, she feels too old for marriage. A slight delay makes her mull over suicide. She constantly dreams of marriage as she hopes that, marriage would bring her love and freedom. She wants a life of glamour and affluence, which is brought to her by the film magazines she eagerly reads. She is looking for a smart, handsome husband, preferably a Neurosurgeon, who will provide her everything in life. The desire of Dimple is exhibited clearly as,

“She wanted a different life- an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris- so she placed her faith in neurosurgeons and architects”(Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.3).

After a prolonged painful waiting which makes her disgust and despair, she is finally married to Amit Kumar Basu, a young engineer, who has planned to go to America to make a good fortune and retiring to live a comfortable rich life in Calcutta.

After their marriage, in her husband's house, Dimple tried her best to please her in-laws. Her effort goes vain. Though her in-laws didn't accept her wholeheartedly, Dimple tries to live up to the expectations of them. But the negligence of her in-laws makes Dimple feel isolated in her own house. She understands the difference between the premarital dreams and the marital realities. But Dimple bears everything by consoling herself that a new life awaits her in a foreign country. She feels that the immigration to America will provide her an opportunity to leave behind her monotonous, frustrating middle class life in Calcutta. But to her dismay, disillusionment alone awaits her in America as well. Dimple experiences immigration only as physical and psychological displacements results in a sense of alienation, a deepening loss of control over her mental instability and killing of her husband.

Dimple does not love her house where she lives in. She felt her flat is 'horrid' (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.18). The “lace doilies are for her so degrading that she wishes she were back in her own room in Rash Behari Avenue” (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.30). She does not even love Amit, her husband. She felt he is not a man of her dreams.

“she wanted to dream of Amit but she knew she would not. Amit did not feed her fantasy life; he was merely the provider of small material comforts. In bitter moments she ranked husband, blender, colour T.V., cassette tape recorder, stereo in their order of convenience” (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.113)

She obsessively measures her husband against her ideal man who has “ a forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips, eyes and chin from a body builder and shoulder ads, the stomach and legs from a trousers ad”(Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.23)

Married life promotes the status of women to motherhood- a stage which brings greater excitement to the Indian women. But for Dimple, the prospect of becoming a mother enrages her. Because she feels motherhood will prevent her from enjoying the cosy life which she would get in a foreign country. Hence, she ruthlessly aborts her baby:

“she had skipped rope until her legs grew numb and her stomach burned; then she 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 drop of the blood washed off her legs; then she collapsed” (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.42).

she justifies herself that she cannot afford to take any relics from her old life to America where she hopes to begin life afresh and become a more exciting person. But, once again, even after going to America, her hopes and dreams are shattered. Life with Amit, both in India and America, is naturally a big disappointment for her. In her moments of feverish introspection she thinks that life has been cruel to her:

“Life should have treated her better, should have added and subtracted in different proportions so that she was not left with a chimera. Amit was no more than that. He did not feed her reveries; he was unreal. She was furious, desperate; she felt sick” (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.156).

Marriage has not “provided all the glittery things she had imagined, had not brought her cocktails under canopied skies and three A.M. drives to dingy restaurants where they sold divine ‘kababs’ rolled in ‘roti’”(Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.101-2).

In America, Dimple and Amit have to stay with a Bengali couple, Jyoti and Meena Sen till Amit gets a job. After entering Sen’s apartment Dimple admires everything there and she feels that she is happier than ever before. But her happiness is only short-lived. She feels that “she’d come very close to getting killed on her third morning in America” (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.60).

In her dreamland Dimple experiences both Indian and American culture. In the beginning she could not digest the culture of the United States because of her deep-rooted Indianness. She has to make several adaptations to fit into the new environment. In New York, her social circle shrinks and she has to move with Punjabi and Bengali families. Dimple’s confidence of getting a happy life shattered, when she goes to buy some cheese cake. After a few pathetic attempts to merge herself into the new culture by wearing the borrowed outfit of Marsha and by flirting with Milt Glasser, Dimple experiences total estrangement from herself and her surroundings as well. The author writes:

“Her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne”(Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.117)

All her sincere efforts to fit into the alien culture failed miserably. So she remains isolated and rootless in her dreamland.

Amit was jobless initially. In his vain search for a job, Amit gets depressed and develops all kinds of complexes. The mood swings of Amit dampen Dimple's happiness and enthusiasm. Dimple feels that, "her life was slow, full of miscalculations" (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.178). Her frustration with Amit raises manifold. Dimple believes that, "a man without a job was not a man at all" (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.102). The gap between the fanciful Dimple and the depressed Amit widens day by day in the U.S. Dimple's sense of alienation further aggravated when Amit refused her suggestion of taking a part time job as a salesgirl in Vinod Khanna's India Emporium. In a vile mood, Dimple shuts herself in the apartment and hates going out. She gets totally cut off from the outside world. The very thought of aloofness disintegrates her psychologically. With utmost disgust and neurosis, Dimple conceives the idea of violence against herself as well as Amit. The author writes:

"setting fire to a sari had been one of the seven types of suicide Dimple had recently devised" (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.115).

Dimple is not able to set a happy home for her even after Amit gets a job. Amit does not have the inclination to understand her loneliness as he is preoccupied with his professional concerns and anxieties. Dimple's psychological imbalances, her immoderate daytime sleeping, her nightmares, her indecisiveness- everything remains unknown to him up to his dying day. So Dimple is left to her own devices to resist the neurosis. This leads to insomnia: "she envied them their sleep. She thought of sleeping bodies as corpses" (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.97).

Dimple's confusion accelerates further compounded when she finds her inability to articulate the language either of the Americanized Indians or the Americans. The language is inadequate to express her thoughts and she remains silenced. Dimple finds herself a misfit to adjust to American ways. So she abandons the real world and sinks into a world of her own, an imaginary world. Insanity takes over and makes her afraid of the things around her:

"Everything scared her: the spattering of the radiators, the brown corduroy sofa with depressions – the needles in the rug, the ironing board..... the leger prints, the cactus that had not flowered the way it was supposed to, the smudgy wide windows behind the dining table" (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.156).

At last, Amit succeeds in finding job as a boiler maintenance engineer and plans to stay in the apartment of Pradosh and Marsha Mukherjee, sister of Milt Glasser. Even after getting a job Amit could provide her only material comforts and hardly bothers about her emotional needs. Though she can act according to her own will in her new residence, without any guidance from

her husband or from Meena Sen, she is unable to set a happy life for her. She withdraws from all physical and mental activity. She has no vision of any future, or any ambition to impel her. Dimple grows prone to unanticipated inertia, exhaustion, endless indecisiveness. Mukherjee in all her novels invests her characters with a kind of self-excluding attitude, a desire to remain culturally and socially isolated from American society even when extracting a financially better future from it.

Dimple thinks Television Set as her only friend and all her cosmos which provides her everything and asks nothing from her in return. Dimple comes to know about television only on the day of her entrance at Sen's apartment. She "had never seen Television, she prayed that someone would turn it on" (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.54). Through this media she is introduced to violence. Added to this she hears more about murder. There were frequent announcements of murders in newspapers, radio and in casual conversations. Talking about murders in America is like talking about the weather. She contemplates violence and killing. Even the American cinemas display only endless violence and murder. So the author writes:

"The women on television led complicated lives, become pregnant frequently and under suspicious circumstances (but were never huge or tired like Meena Sen), murdered and were murdered, were brought to trial and released, they suffered through the pig-pong volley of their fates with courage" (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.73).

Dimple's mind is fully occupied with the films and programs which she sees on Television. She loses touch with reality. She is not able to distinguish between what she sees on the TV and the real life. The murders and death on TV become "the voice of madness" (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.176).

In order to cope with her alienation Dimple starts searching for alternatives including attending and throwing parties and serving food in a glamorous way. Later, in her moments of utmost crisis Dimple turns towards Milt Glasser, brother of Marsha Mookherji and Ina Mullick, an Indian born women living in America. Ina Mullick is such a notorious woman who smokes, drinks and flirts with other men. She is "more American than the Americans" (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.68). The sanity and Indianness in Dimple starts eroding, after her relationship with Ina and Milt.

Milt Glasser's frequent visit to her house changed Dimple. Initially she felt quite embarrassed and uncomfortable with Milt, but later she discovers that he is a moral and emotional support to her and even recognition of her identity, which she had missed in Amit. In the heart of her hearts she likes Milt Glasser: "He was the only one she could talk to. With the others, people like Amit and Ina and even Meena Sen she talked silences. With Amit she could talk about all sorts of things" (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.191). She enjoys going out with Milt. She is

much impressed by the character of Milt. She goes shopping, to eat pizza with Milt. She has soothing feel in the hands of Milt.

“He wrapped his enormous arm around her cold shoulders; it was a cool protective arm, she shouldn’t draw any closer to his body. ‘Dimple, I’d like to look after you. You need some looking after’ (Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.199).

Dimple is much impressed by these words from Milt which she never heard from Amit since their marriage. But even Milt remains a man of mystery; Dimple cannot get him to reveal his real source of income. She has to be content with his assertion that he loves her. In this mad world of appearances and uncertainties, she loses her hold on her inherited culture and values.

Since Dimple is dangling between the Indian and the American culture, she feels guilty of her extramarital relationship with Milt and worries about hiding the matter from her husband. She is torn by her psychic and emotional tension. The extra marital relationship made Dimple to break all the cultural, class and familial norms. Finally, in order to escape from her guilty consciousness, she takes the drastic step of murdering her husband Amit, who is insensitive to her feeling. She evolves inwardly from a docile, obedient, submissive and typical Indian wife into a dejected, psychotic, sick and furious murderer in order to get rid of depression and to attain individual freedom. She feels that she cannot bear this sort of life anymore:

“but 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 had been played with, sometimes quite roughly by children who claimed to love her”(Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.212).

One night, after watching TV programme, Dimple took Amit to the kitchen. She felt that was the apt situation to tell him about her relationship with Milt Glasser. Amit sat on the counter and spilled sugar, which irritated her. Dimple thought that it was impossible to live with him watching him spilling sugar. So, in a stunningly calm and cool manner she takes out the knife from the kitchen drawer and comes very closer to him and

“she touched the mole very lightly and let her fingers draw a circle around the delectable spot, then she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times, each time a little harder, until the milk in the bowl of cereal was a pretty pink and the flakes were mushy”(Mukherjee, *Wife*: p.212).

Thus she punishes her inattentive husband for his lapses and unceremoniously ends up her disharmonious marital life. She kills Amit to feel very American, almost like a character in a T.V. serial.

In this novel, Mukherjee has concentrated on the female protagonist’s sense of alienation which leads to disillusionment in her life. Dimple’s desired freedom from her disgusting Calcutta middle class life, instead of turning her hilarious, leaves her utterly lonely and bleak. She has

already been in a sick state of mind ever since she left India, but her very feel of alienation from her husband, the environment, the deception and the outward glitter of American life drive her to the fits of psychic depression and ultimate insanity. Thus, Dimple's problems lie within her. She had shown potential signs of alienation even in Calcutta before embarking on her voyage to America. Because of her inbuilt foreignness, she couldn't leave herself behind wherever she goes. Dimple's alienated self finds solution to her problems only in murdering her husband. Her immigration which further aggravated her aloofness ends on a tragic note.

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