

Self- Identity and Cultural Conflict as Projected in Bhatrati Mukherjee's *Wife*: A Brief Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

*This paper depicts the cultural conflict faced by the protagonist of the novel **Wife**. Mukherjee as an Indian Diasporic writer, tries to focus on cross cultural issues and reveals how sensitive women protagonists who long for self identity in the host culture. Mukherjee's novel **Wife** is a fitting example for portrayal of women's problems, like internal turmoil and cultural conflict.*

Key words: *Diaspora, culture, isolation, assimilation, alienation, self-identity.*

Indian English Fiction is a late development. The earliest writing of Indians in English consisted of prose-letters, memoranda, and translations, religious, social, political and cultural tracts. The evolution of lucid, clear, simple and idiomatic prose style and the deep concern for multitudinous social and national problems which permeate the work of Rammohan Roy, Ram Gopal Ghose, Surendranath Banerjee, G.K.Gokhale and other pioneers of Indian Renaissance paved the way for the growth and development of Indian English fiction. India was "the fountain head of storytelling in ancient days. Dandin's *Dasa Kumar Charita*, Subandhu's *Vasavadutta* and Bana Bhatt's *Kadambari* are outstanding examples of prose fiction in Sanskrit but fiction in the modern sense is the offspring of the impact of Western literature on the Indian mind" (Kumar 1). The novel in India was purely a foreign importation. The notable English novelists like Fielding, Defoe and Scott and a few others apprised the Indian writers with the theme and technique of fiction. Thus, novel as an art form came to India with the British.

No doubt, novel was a new genre in Indian literature. In various Indian languages, novel became a popular literary form which attracted such great writers as Bhudeva. Chandra Mukherjee, Bankim Chandra, Tagore, Kannada Galagnath. The English renderings of novels written in various Indian languages contributed to the evolution of Indian English novel in the nineteenth century and in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee, "...the flowering of Indo-Anglian fiction coincided with the novel's coming of age in the regional languages of India" (P 19). In course of "the reciprocal influence between the novel in English and the novel in the regional languages has been rather more intimate and purposive than such influence in the fields of poetry or drama" (Iyengar 314). Novelists from all parts of India contributed their mite to the development of Indian English novel.

In the last century, several Indian writers distinguished themselves not only in traditional Indian languages but also in English. The major writers like R.K.Narayan, Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, Raja Rao, Amita Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry contributed a lot to the growth of Indian English novel. Following male writers, the women writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Bharati Mukherjee expressed feelings of segregation, alienation and nostalgia. In the last two decades there has been an astonishing flowering of Indian women writing in English, the literature of this period being published both in India and elsewhere. The authors are mostly Western educated middle-class women who expressed in their writings their discontent with the plight of upper-caste and class traditional Hindu women trapped in repressive institutions such as child-marriage, dowry and prohibitions on Women's education, arranged marriages, Sati and enforced widowhood. The image of Women in fiction has undergone a sea change during the four decades.

Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards conflicting female characters searching for identity. As Dhawan has put it, "Women writers in India are moving forward with their stong and sure, strides matching the pace of the world" (P 65). They started bursting out in full bloom spreading their own individual fragrances. Now they are recognized for their originality, versatility and the indigenous flavor of the soil that they bring to their work. The Women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das, Shobha De, Bharati Mukherjee just to name a few who hold their own in the woman writer's world of initial rejection, dejection, familial bonds, domesticity and what not. It is really amazing to note that these writers have climbed the ladder of success through the bitter and painful ways.

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most remarkable writers of Indian diaspora. She has lived through several phases of expatriation, firstly as a colonial in British-ruled India, secondly the citizen of an independent India, thirdly as the post-colonial Indian in Canada and finally as the citizen of the USA. In her novels and short stories, she has dealt with the theme of expatriation and immigration. Mukherjee's novels are different from the novels of other diasporic writers. As a woman novelist, she usually focuses her attention on female protagonists and their problems. Female protagonists are quite powerful and dominant in her novels. She presents their conflicts and inner struggles. No doubt, the novelist does not depict merely realities but inner currents of thoughts and feelings. The feminist problems and issues receive due picturization from Bharati's pen. Her novel *Wife* may be cited as a fitting example for portrayal of women's problems, like internal turmoil especially cultural conflict.

In today's society women are seen as objects rather than human beings. Truly speaking Women are the ones who should be treated as Goddesses, because no society or country can progress without an active participation of women in all walks of life. Women play a vital role both in the society and family affairs. Though they play many significant roles as daughter, wife, mother, daughter-in-law and many other roles in society but they are still found suffering under the male chauvinistic society.

This discrimination begins right from their childhood. Male superiority is forced upon them right from their innocence. They have no freedom or rights to do the things they like. All their creativity got submerged because of culture, tradition and the norms followed in the society. Women suffer so grievously in the society as well as in the hands of man. This suffering leads to 'Diasporic' writing.

The term 'Diaspora' comes from the Greek word 'diaspirein' meaning, to scatter from their homeland to the alien land. Indian diaspora refers to the people who migrated from India to other countries in search of employment, better standards of living. When people move from their host land to alien land they face lot of sufferings like loneliness, discrimination, alienation, identity crisis, etc. In the words of Prof. Sunita B. Nimavat, "Diasporic literature is concerned with the individual's or community's attachment to homeland and also a longing for belonging to the host country" (P 31).

Diasporic writing of Indian English fiction writers can be classified into two categories as first generation immigrant writers and second generation immigrant writers. First generation immigrant writers are the ones who move from their native land trying to get adapt to the culture and tradition in the new land, whereas the second generation immigrant writers follow the writing of first generation.

The Indian diasporic women writers have a significant place in Indian diasporic writing. Some of the prominent Indian diasporic women writers are Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, Manju Kapur, Krian Desai, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, and Meena Alexander. They unfold the emotional entanglements and the psychological anxiety involved in the immigrant experience. These writers portray how modern Indian women attempt to free themselves economically, domestically and sexually from the male dominated society.

The diasporic writers are often pre-occupied with the element of nostalgia as they seek to locate themselves in new culture. They often find themselves in new culture. They often find themselves getting struck between two cultures. So diasporic writing helps the writer and brings out the cultural conflict faced by the immigrant and it helps to build a novel with an image of India and abroad.

Bharati Mukherjee who was born on July 27,1940 to an upper middle class Hindu Brahmin family in Calcutta, India. She was the second daughter of Sudhir Lal and Bina Mukherjee. By the age of three she learned how to read and write. Mukherjee earned B.A. from the University of Calcutta in 1959. Once she completed her M.A. in English, she went to University in Iowa to attend the writer's workshop so as to become a writer from her childhood. Mukherjee in an interview with Runar Vignisson she confessed: "I knew from when I was very young, long before I was ten that I was going to be a writer".

Mukherjee is a first generation Indian diasporic writer living in the United States. She is a novelist, short-story and non-fiction writer. She established herself as a true role model for the second generation diasporic writers. Mukherjee is a third generation world feminist writer who deals with the problems and issues related to women particularly in India. She depicts the cross cultural conflicts faced by Indian women immigrant. Mukherjee's works have an autobiographical touch. She becomes an influential literary figure among Indian women writers. She is honoured as 'Grand dame' of diasporic Indian English literature.

Mukherjee has written eight novels: *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave It to Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughter* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004) and the last novel being *Miss New India* (2011).

Mukherjee's novels depict the modern women and their struggle to attain selfhood. Her female protagonists try to free themselves from traditional constraints and from male chauvinistic society. Mukherjee also expresses how Indians face the problems of adaptation and survival in an alien land for

their better life. She also brought down the cultural clash between the East and the West. When persons leaves their own culture and enters into another culture, their original culture comes into conflict in the new alien land. This leads to search for self-identity which becomes as an important aspect in their life.

This paper is an attempt to highlight the position of women and the problems faced by them both in India and abroad. Through the character Dimple in the novel *Wife*, Mukherjee makes it a point that though her protagonist is only victim in male dominated society, she manages herself to overcome the situation as a powerful modern woman and face the challenges that come in her life.

In the novel *Wife*, the protagonist wants to break through the traditional taboos of a wife. Dimple is a young Bengali girl, like other girls she is full of dreams about her marriage and the life to be led after marriage. But the reality is all her dreams fade away as a dream. When she marries Amit Basu, she visualizes a new life in America.

In India, each and every individual girl is bound to cherish a dream about her marriage and the life after marriage with her partner. In the same way, Dimple dreams of her married life. When she comes to know that she has to migrate to America with her husband Amit Basu, she begins to live in a different world. She felt that she is going to have good time in America with Amit. But to the contrary all her dreams disappeared once she landed in America.

Amit expects Dimple to play the role of wife in their traditional way. He wants her to be an ideal Indian wife, stay at home and keep the house prepared in all respects for the husband. But the circumstances around her made her follow the tradition of America and she does not claim to be as an Indian wife. This leads to utter despair and frustration. She developed a kind of feeling to the effect that by marriage, she lost her own identity.

As Basu has started behaving in different ways. He wants her to be docile and submissive. He needs her only for sexual harassment. He wants her to listen to his words. All this makes her long for self-recognition and freedom. Because of his behavior, she wants to abort her child to free herself from pregnancy, which is viewed by her as Basu's property in her womb.

The novel, *Wife* depicts the life of Dimple who suffers from the confusions regarding American culture and habitat and internal commotion to choose between personal deliverance on the one hand and matrimonial bondage on the other. In the beginning of novel itself one can get to know how she got submerged by her father from her willingness. She set her mind to get married to a neurosurgeon but her father made a mismatch for her life with an engineer in America.

"In traditional Hindu families like ours, men provided and women were provided for. My father was a patriarch and I a pliant daughter. The neighborhood I'd grown up in was homogenously Hindu, Bengali-speaking, and middle class. I didn't expect myself to ever disobey or disappoint my father by setting own goals and taking change of my future" (Wife).

Mukherjee in her novel depicts the transformation of women when they travel from their native land to alien land. In the novel *Wife*, she deals with the problems of loneliness, insecurity and alienation. She tries to transform herself to adapt to the host culture, understand the self and to get an inner sense of freedom. Dimple has been educated in India and is married to an Indian husband. Her memory is filled with the image of India. She feels that she lost her freedom in her own traditional land and she believes that immigrant journey will bring her freedom and happiness.

Dimple had imagined a life of freedom and independence in a society like America; she realizes that America cannot fulfill her dream and that her marriage had deceived her. She tries to assimilate herself into the American culture by wearing the outfits like Americans which is borrowed from her neighbor Marsha Mookherji and by flirting with her brother. But Dimple fails in all her attempt to become an American.

She thinks that it is difficult for a young woman like her who was born and brought up in a different culture and environment, to get adapted to the American culture. As she was alone at home, she felt lonely and alienated during day time. She spent her time by reading magazines, newspapers and watching T.V. Most of the time her attention was drawn towards violence, as her mind was filled with violence thought and she started contemplating nine different methods of committing suicide. She had nightmares about suicide and death.

Dimple's hatred towards Amit's way of life made her get isolated from the world around her. Amit failed to understand the emotional needs of Dimple. They did not express their true feelings for each other and they even did not communicate properly. Dimple began to live in the imaginary world by getting rid of reality in life. As she was caught between two contrasting cultures, she was unable to adapt to either of the tradition. She tries to follow American culture and tradition. But her attempt to follow alien culture caused disaster in her life as an individual also in her relationship with her husband Amit.

For Dimple, television became the reality and it became her life. As she was torn between her psychic and emotional tensions, she took the drastic step of murdering her husband. She decides to kill her husband as she felt that she could not bear this sort of life forever. So she brought out the violence scene in her life, which she often watched in T.V. serials. Television to which she was addicted reflects and recreates its own reality.

Dimple attempted this murder as if she saw and heard. Her attempt made to stab her husband was successful. Before she stabbed him, she gave a voice to her feelings in a language that was alien to her:

“She groped for the right words, then remembering Ina and Milt, she pounced on an English word and trotted it out the way Ina had done on a more eventful day. You just aren’t supportive, if you know what I mean. You’re nuts, Amit retorted. But he took his notebook out of his pajama pocket and scribbled down a word. Dimple tried to sidle closer to him so she could make out what he had written. Could he be writing down her word, adding it to his list of words to show off in company? Revenge! Revenge!” (Wife).

Finally she kills Amit to suppress her guilty consciousness and also she feels that she becomes like American, about like the characters in a T.V.serial. Through the characters of Dimple Mukherjee tries to bring out the outburst of woman’s emotion and fighting for self identity. Dimple feels that by killing her husband it helps her to find her own identity.

In the modern world, women are portrayed physically as fragile persons when compared to men, but the truth is they are strong enough to overcome all the troubles they face in their life both in the society and in family. Dimple is one such character. Cultural conflict isolates her from the whole of society and family.

Thus, Bharati Mukherjee effectively brings out the immigrant journey of her protagonist from India to America. Dimple’s loneliness, fear and frustration made her to kill her husband; she was just unaware of the things happenings around her. Dimple realizes her mistake only after she kills her husband. “The full cycle of expatriation is presented in *Wife* that involves immigration, alienation, adaptation and assimilation” (Nimavat 30).

To conclude, it may be said that Bharati Mukherjee as a diaspora novelist stands apart highlighting the struggle for survival and acculturation rather than nostalgia for homeland and sense of displacement and rootless less. She believes that human beings like plants can be rooted. She is also aware of the threats and problems expatriation involves but she believes that in a multicultural, global world, assimilation is not only desirable but inevitable. In the novel *Wife*, Americanization of Dimple is almost complete. The action involves both physical and psychological aspects. In a word, Mukherjee is one of those diaspora writers not having on the theme of displacement and up rootedness but stressing on the need to imbibe new culture by merging with the milieu of the host country.

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Sacrifice is giving up something good for something better.
~ Anonymous