



## THE THEME OF 'NEW WOMAN' IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S WIFE

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years migrant writing has been one of the most popular trends and this creative impulse has consequently given birth to several talented, promising, distinguished authors. Among all these fascinating different voices, Bharati Mukherjee has played an interesting role. Bharati Mukherjee's in her novel 'Wife', deals with the complications that come from being thrown between two different worlds of reality and illusion. Mukherjee takes us deep into the mind of Dimple as she makes a transition from being single to marrying a husband chosen by her father. As the novel progresses, Dimple is characterized as a young naïve Indian woman, who tries to reconcile the Bengali ideal of the perfect, passive wife with the demands of her new American life. At the end of the story, being suppressed by such men and attempts to be the ideal Bengali Wife, She contemplated many ways to commit suicide. Out of fear and personal instability, she is ultimately driven to a different kind of violence by murdering her husband and eventually commits suicide. This story reflects the author's mental status in many of its parts. Bharati Mukherjee herself remarks in 'Days and Nights in Calcutta' (1977: 268). "A young Bengali woman could rebel by simply reading a book or refusing to fast". *The Chicago Tribune* comments, "Bharati Mukherjee has built a small, fine provocative novel that sparkles with the accuracy of its detail and rings with an inner terror and truth." (Wife: Penguin, 1990).

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Bharati Mukherjee, (born-July 27, 1940, Calcutta, India) Indian-born American novelist and short-story writer presents Indian culture and immigrant experience in her works. She became a U.S. citizen in 1989 and that year accepted a position of teaching postcolonial and world literature at the University of California at Berkeley. Mukherjee's work features not only cultural clashes but also undercurrents of violence. As a versatile writer, she wrote five novels, two collections of stories, essays, and two nonfiction books which she co-authored with her husband Clark Blaise. Her novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*, both published in the early 1970s, are novels about the isolation of Indian expatriates.

In *Wife*, Dimple Das Gupta is married to a young engineer, and soon finds herself emigrating to America. As a new woman, she finds her new life impossible to adjust to, and her attempts to become American – to learn to speak American – English by watching the television, for example – cause her to question her own cultural values, and even her own happiness. The infidelity and the murder which brings the novel to its shocking close are the alternatives with which Dimple's American experience has provided her.

The novel *Wife* has apparently a straight structure of narration. Bharati Mukherjee presents *the world of Dimple as a world of day dreams, fantasy, nightmares and morbid psyche*. In the novel 'Dimple' the wife of an engineer Amit turns to be splintered by a series of nightmarish images that mark the protagonist's growing alienation from her sense of 'self'.

Thus despite her conventional upbringing in Calcutta, Dimple dreams of becoming 'Sita' the ideal wife of Hindu legends who had walked through fire at her husband's request. She would like to experience such pain and loyalty of Sita which seemed reserved for married women (6), while one part of her wants to emulate traditional images and the other self rebels in morbid musings. One cannot justify her morbid imagination and behaviour even on the basis of her immaturity. After many

passionate assertions of being a traditional and Sita-like spouse, she should have welcomed the prospect of motherhood. But, it looks as though she is a fragmented personality. She grew bitter about relying on as her father was searching for the 'ideal boy'. Her arranged marriage with the mechanical engineer Amit Basu, her early married life in Calcutta is scarred by the thoughts of a dead baby lizard in her pillow case (22).

Her in-laws objected to the name Dimple, which is considered too frivolous and unbengali. Her husband decided to call her Nandini and Dimple tried to get used to being called Nandini. She has projected herself as a secret and choice girl with a sweet name Dimple in her parental home. "She dreams that she is a Sita, a docile wife conquering husband's enemy by withholding affection and other tactics of domestic passive resistance" (Mukherjee's 1976).

She seems to be an ideal centered wife. We see, however, a slow but sure rejection of her life imposed on her. Amit with his over bearing attitude, with his refusal to emphasize with her romantic fantasies, drives her to a kind of rebellion. As the apartment is horrifying, Dimple wished she were back in her own room in Rash Behari Avenue. 'But not with a name like Nandini: It was old-fashioned and unsung (30). The apartment is h-o-r-r-i-d. She quickly spelled the last word in English (18).

Her in-laws looked on the unborn baby as communal property and were very solicitous of her health. They laid down rules (33). But Dimple hated all the Basus (33). The vision of neurosurgeons "dressed in spotless white, peering into opened skulls' fed on her romantic imagination coupled with a penchant for the grotesque has now turned into a sinister vision of abortionists, "Men with broken teeth and dirty fingers who dug into her body" (33). She does not belong to the world of reality any more. What ought to have been real is not real to her. "Vomiting was real to her, but pregnancy was not" (31). The eerie vision she conjures up for her unborn baby, a one with wrinkled skin



like a very old man's and a large head filled with water"(43). She is so cruel that she cannot help wondering about the novelists capacity for creating such outrageous images. Dimple's obsessive fascination with her vomit, her pride and joy in the very act of vomiting are terribly revolting. Justifying to herself that the baby hinder her chances of becoming a more exciting person abroad, she deliberately skips her way to abortion with a skipping rope in order to be rid of the 'tyrannical fetus she was carrying (42) thinking that it is not a murder at after all (42). The swollen mouse she kills with an unreasonable ferocity symbolizes her own pregnant self. "In an outburst of hatred, she smashed the top of a small gray head" (35). "To Dimple the dead mouse looked pregnant". This incident also hints at the homicidal tendency of Dimple that makes the reader apprehensive.

In the second part of *wife*, Dimple faced the strangeness of free land New York. From the very first day of her arrival in New York, Dimple is addicted to day T.V. shows. She often watches muggings, rape, murder – an aspect of the new world that seems to hold an inexplicable but unending fascination for immigrant residents like Jyothi Sen. Dimple falls an easy victim to the various magazines and T.V. ads. She accepts them literally and one example is sufficient to speak volumes about her total lack of maturity and depth is a magazine add, which exhorted people to express themselves in their 'surroundings', "express yourself in your surroundings. Discover your own grand passion and indulge it to excess. Then simplify the rest, throw out, be ruthless, that's the secret to happiness" (87).

Fascinated and inspired by this ad ,Dimple's looks at Sens apartment which she found lovely before, with distaste, as now it seems to her only convenient' perhaps, it is the other part of the ad she is trying to follow when she strikes an illicit relationship with Milt Glasser in a passionate attempt to find an identity in America. Dimple's feelings of helplessness caused by the gap between life's promises and day-today reality, find expression in 'Walking nightmares'. Dimple, a very Americanized Indian friend, Ina Mullick, Washed up on an American beach as a dead body draped in Dimple's own sari

(103). At her feet lay Ina Mullick, in Dimple's sari, a thin line of water spilling from her mouth (103). Her friend Mullick appears in her dream as dead, which properly interpreted could mean that Dimple fervently wishes herself dead. It is plain displacement contrived by dream - work: She thought of seven ways to commit suicide in Queens (102).

The effect of constant proximity of death begins to severely tell upon her psyche. She finds herself collapsing inwardly, becomes terribly apprehensive of imaginary dangers, entertains and begins to gradually lose touch with reality. Dimple retreats to a bench in the playground in front of the apartment building and stays there many hours (177) and occasionally day dreaming of killing Amit. She seemed to be waiting for events that failed to occur or occurred unnoticed. Her life was slow, full of miscalculations. She felt dizzy when she had sat in the play ground (178) Worrying tendencies to violence appear in Dimple, wondering if "She could make Amit die in his sleep." (98) and in her feeling of hatred for the furniture and plastic flowers in the home of their Indian hosts in Queens, she deliberately breaks off three plastic petals, while supposedly dusting the plastic flowers and perceives them to be 'like detached ear lobes' or 'parts of her own body'.

Dimple becomes addicted to the media. Her inner obsessions and mental wanderings based on images imbibed from T.V. serials and shows tend to dominate her consciousness in the third part of the novel, undoing her contact with reality completely. She begins to lose her sense of balance and sense of reality. When Amit appears in different to news of the suicide in India of a woman, Dimple seeks revenge in the idea of piercing Amit's body as she is extremely lonely. Later in the 'unnerving Silence' of their subtle apartment in Manhattan at 4 O' clock in the afternoon Dimple began to panic. "In a mirror across the room, she saw herself a small, stiff lump, hair arranged like black bat wings against the sky blue pillow" (128).

Dimple becomes aware that 'T.V. was becoming the voice of madness' (176) and then she went to bed and then conceives of an extravagant scheme, where she would kill Amit and hide his body



in the freezer(195) thereby feeling. Dimple is conjured up as Kali, the death goddess. She owns responsibility for killing the cacti, "even the hardy little ivies and geraniums" (188). She feels "Very American somehow almost like a character in a T.V. Series' (195). In the climax of the novel Dimple feels' "something had torn loose and was hanging, in space"(208). Thus Dimple has been portrayed free and rebelling throughout the novel. She has no inhibition in expressing whatever she feels. Her husband Amit's murder signifies how an innocent, duty conscious husband falls a prey to the neurotic madness of his wife. This can be understood as a part of herself learning her shattered within. She is thus able to asses her own actions calmly comparing her role always to that of wives' in operas" (211). The last scene depicts Dimple in kitchen of their rented home feeling "She was falling apart like a very old toy" (212) and stabbing Amit from behind in the neck, near the mole just under the hairline using a kitchen knife and made seven stabs in a row. Dimple seems to be indulging in her passion to become a 'new woman' and lead a very free, exciting life as the soap operas on T.V. shows. Obviously Dimple is a physically disturbed person; her psychic troubles centering around the syndrome of depression. If we keep in view the fact that Mrs. Mukherjee is a very 'conscious artist ', the images of depression are both the physical dimple and the 'mole'. Infact, Dimple stabs the 'mole' on her husband's chest seven times in itself is a clue symbolically to the destruction of the marriage as a sanctified ritual. For according to Hindu ritual, the married couple takes seven steps and this is, ritually, supposed to bind them together. Thus the 'new woman' emerged out of Dimple in a state of depression by breaking the sacred bonds of her traditional marriage.

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