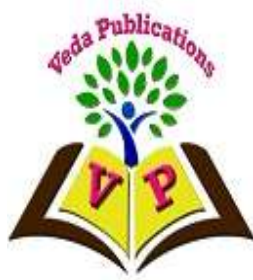


**DISINTEGRATION OF THE 'SELF' IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S WIFE**Dr.P. Tamarasan<sup>1\*</sup>, Jayapragash.J<sup>2</sup><sup>1&2</sup>(Assistant Professors of English, SRM University.)Email- [tamilking76@gmail.com](mailto:tamilking76@gmail.com)**ABSTRACT**

Bharati Mukherjee (1940-2017) is one of the most acclaimed writers of the Indian Diaspora whose novels are impregnated with issues of identity and the yearning for an understanding of the self in an alien land. She is well known for the portrayal of the myriad, complex personal and cultural negotiations that emigrants, especially women have to go through in their arduous journey of life in an alien land. Torn between two conflicting cultures of the homeland and the migrated land, the deformation and the transformation of the identity of women and the predicament of women who need to negotiate through intricate situations to survive in a new world are the primary focus of her novels. She herself seemed to have caught between two divergent cultures, the protagonists' rebellion against regressive traditions of the homeland and their persistent efforts to replace such tradition with a corresponding equivalence of modernity and the temerity with which the protagonists endure the cross cultural negotiations find a place in her novels. This paper attempts to critically analyse the psyche of the protagonist who breaks the traditional shackles of womanhood that is known for passivity, patience and submissiveness. It further examines the agonized psyche struggling to seek an identity in a foreign land, finally succumbing to a total self-alienation.

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The word 'Diaspora' is a common term used in the postcolonial literary studies to describe people who have dispersed or displaced due to ethnic crisis, territorial disputes, war and forced migration. The experience of such displaced people from their homelands who have a strong cultural, religious and social binding with their native lands and the quest for their identity in the immigrated land is emphasized in many literary works written in modern times. Hybridity or Cross-Culturalism is a common phenomenon in the era of technology as many people nowadays migrate to various parts of the world for education or employment. Those who travel to different countries have to embrace a new culture or adapt to the predominant culture/s existing in the migrated land for their survival. When they fail to do so, they remain alienated from the society and have to undergo various psychological problems. The depiction of cross-cultural experiences has become one of the pivotal themes of the diaspora writers. Expression of such experiences is profusely seen in the writings of Indian Diaspora writers such as Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta and Jumpha Lahiri. The writers who constitute the Indian Diaspora have pictured the different aspects of influence of the Western world in their writings and each writer is unique in her portrayal of problems. For instance, if Lahiri's stories focus on the cultural differences between parents and children in the immigrated land; the stories of Mukherjee depict the mental agonies of migrated women and the way they resist the Indian masculinity in the immigrated land and their struggle for identity.

The cross-cultural condition begins to erupt when the people of two or more cultural groups come in proximity to each other. Being an immigrant herself to Canada at first and then to America, Mukherjee seemed to have caught between two divergent cultures and her quest for identity of her own self is evident in her novels. This is one of the primary reasons for giving much emphasis on the condition of Indian women immigrants in North America in the aspect of cross-cultural confrontation and in the control of their fate. Most of the women protagonists in her novels move away from their homelands to an alien land which is socially and

culturally different. Their move to a foreign land makes them suffer from multifarious complex issues such as racism, sexism, violence, high social expectations and pressures, poverty, cultural adaptation, lack of family support and other traumatic disorders pertaining to expatriate experiences. In all her works, her protagonists, chiefly women, find difficult to confront and acclimatize in a multicultural society without losing their roots of native culture.

As an immigrant writer who has been exposed to myriad cultures, Mukherjee explores the female immigrant sensibility and the diasporic experience of cultural alienation in her fiction. Having been born into a Hindu Brahmin family, Mukherjee's approach to life and its problems is deeply rooted in her Indian upbringing. In her fiction, she handles Western themes, settings and characters who are Westernized or bicultural. However, she is compelled to admit that the very structure of her imaginative faculty is essentially Hindu and essentially moral. Among the women writers of the Indian Diaspora, Mukherjee considers herself the pioneer of depicting cross-cultural experiences of immigrant women. A thorough study of her protagonists vividly shows that there are two types of immigrants portrayed in her novels. Her perception of the first type of immigrants belongs to the American mainstream society which is known for its confidence, sophistication and equanimity as against those who do not assimilate into an American mainstream but visibly expand the margin of what is called 'The American Experience'. The second group of immigrants are neither nostalgic for their personal past nor afraid of the unfamiliar present. Their prime strategy is to adapt to a new culture without resistance or surrender. Mukherjee's personal life with dislocation and displacements has impelled her to describe the various psychological traumas or experiences of her feminine sensibility as an author. Her own travelling experiences in India, Canada and the United States of America have left a deep impression in her works and hence we find a lot autobiographical elements in her novels. As an immigrant writer, in many interviews she has reiterated the fact that her childhood and adolescent experiences in Bengal have always been an intriguing and fascinating factor in making a complete



revelation about her hometown, her family and her place in that community. This kind of revelation has provided an impetus to write an autobiography rather than to mythologize an Indian national identity.

Bharathi Mukherjee's second novel *Wife* (1975) exhibits the array of liberation as well as the possibilities of constriction of tradition, gender and the boundaries of space in the alien land. *Wife* is about the story of Dimple, a middle-class Bengali woman's marriage with Amit Basu, a consultant Engineer from IIT Kharapur who has applied for emigration to the United States. Going to the United States for employment especially in the field of Information Technology is the aspiration of many young engineers in India and other parts of the world. Their ambition is to go to the land of opportunities and earn money and settle in their lives. The characters Mukherjee draw for her novels are from middle class Indian families. Most of her protagonists in are Bengali, and therefore, the characters are invested with the Bengali culture. After the marriage of Dimple and Amit, they both migrate to America where the protagonist Dimple encounters the problem of alienation, isolation and a deep sense of cultural shock. This novel is a clear depiction of the life of an Indian woman who attitude is untraditional and who is afflicted with neurosis. 'The experiences of violent unhousement from a biological homeland and rehousement in an adopted homeland that is not always welcoming to its dark-complexioned citizens' (Beyond Multiculturalism, 32) form the fulcrum of this novel.

Dimple Dasgupta's ambition and fantasy of living a different kind of life made possible through marriage is shattered when she lands in the world of multiculturalism. In the first part of the novel, it is clear that Dimple has high hopes of marriage and she fantasizes that a marriage would bring her everything worthwhile, a life in high society and love. The seemingly endless wait comes to an end when she is married to Amit, but her wait to lead a happy life with Amit becomes dull and disillusioning. She is unaware of the significance of marriage and motherhood and reacts in the most aberrant manner. She even feels that her pregnancy may rob her of the pleasures of leading a sophisticated life in

America. She deliberately brings about her own miscarriage to break free of anything that would weigh her down in the pursuit of liberation and individuality. For Indian women, pregnancy is a symbol of fertility and a boon to them as they are the chief creators of posterity. However, Dimple reacts in contrary to the traditional view of pregnancy as 'she thought of ways to get rid of ... whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes.' (Wife: 31). Her strong dislike for pregnancy is developed due to her disillusionment with Amit who fails to fulfil her fantasies. As she is about to migrate to the land of opportunities with the hope that it would bring her happiness, freedom, materialistic comforts, she opines that she does not want to carry anything that reminds her of the past life. She firmly believes that the old things may cause dejection and disillusionment. This feeling of anxiety has resulted in aborting the foetus by skipping ropes. The description of her self-abortion is poignant and touching:

She had skipped rope until her legs grew numb and her stomach burned; then she had poured water from the heavy bucket overhead, shoulders, the tight curve of her stomach. She had poured until the last of the blood washed off her legs; then she collapsed. (42)

Dimple does not feel to be repentant for the ruthless deed of killing a prospect human life. For an Indian wife, childlessness is an anathema, she is always considered an outcaste in the midst of women who have off springs and she is not even allowed to take part in various rituals and customs involving married women with children. The protagonist acts a maverick and iconoclast who breaks up all the conventional attributes of Indian women and is persistent in her efforts to lead a fanciful life. To overturn such ingrained or intrinsic values in a conventional society would involve a major emotional imbalance. However, Dimple acts on the nebulous and the most undefined impulses, and thinks no more about it.

The second part of the novel deals with Dimple's cultural shock and aberrant behaviour in the United States. There are many surprises awaiting Dimple in the US. As soon as the couple land in the



US, Jyoti and Meena Sen are the welcoming friends who accommodate Dimple and Amit in their apartment at Queens, New York until Amit gets an employment. Dimple's inability to acquire fluency in English and her self-consciousness about being different both from the Indians in Queens and from the mainstream Americans, leads her eventually to violent dejection and despair. The party at Vinod Khanna's place is remarkable at first after landing in the US, Dimple sees many Indian Americans. She sees people like the Sens, Mehra, Khannas and Bhattacharyas. She feels happy to hear Ms. Chakravorty speaking the language known to her. The gathering of the visitors at Vinod Khanna's place represents two sects of Indians namely, the Indian Americans and the Americanized Indians. These sects are the representatives of cross-culturalism. The Sens maintain an air of Indianess in their apartment with a 'framed batik wall hanging with a picture of Lord Ram and his court.' This indicates that the Indian Americans are conscious of their Indianness. On the contrary, characters like Ina and Bijoy Mullick who represent the Americanized Indians assimilate the Western culture and are seen with smoking, drinking, flirting and going to night schools and they leave a bad influence on Dimple. On seeing two Indians who seem to be culturally different in an alien land, Dimple is left in a state of bewilderment and disillusionment.

In a multicultural society like the United States, Dimple is seen to be strangled by the traditional role model of a submissive, dependent and selfless Indian wife and the new role model of a wife who is self-assertive and self-reliant in the West. When she arrives in the US in pursuit of her happiness and freedom, 'she thought how lucky she was to be alone among Marsha's appliances, to explore the wonder of modern American living unencumbered by philosophical questions about happiness.' (Wife: 136) Her dream of living a liberated life in the alien land is shattered when Amit refuses to let her work for Vinod Khanna. The restriction imposed on Dimple by Amit turns her interest in watching television, which becomes her only entertainment, while Amit is ceaselessly searching for jobs. Amit gets depressed to find himself jobless and gradually loses his interest in

Dimple. As he seems to be engrossed with the idea of getting a job in the alien land, he completely neglects his wife. Though Dimple wants her husband to be 'infallible, intractable, godlike but with boyish charm,' he seems to have collapsed inwardly, to have grown frail and shabby. Their distancing with each other results in the cessation of communication and devoid of love for each other. This migration or cultural transplant causes not only the problem of identity but also severs their personal relationship to a great extent. Amit works most of the time to keep his job secure and does not spend much time with Dimple. This alienation leads to a wide gulf between them.

The feeling of aloofness makes her become American by wearing Marsha Mookherji's clothes thus unconsciously following an identity that is alien to her. She does not want to go out and experience the new world, but is held back by the inhibitions of her native culture. In a state of neuroses, Dimple hits upon the idea of violence against herself and Amit as well. She constantly thinks new ways of committing suicide or killing Amit, though she never considers murder seriously. All her resentment is targeted at Amit who seeks in her an Indian wife in America. Monotony, morbidity, revenge and death rule Dimple's mind, and in a disorienting impulsive fit, she murders Amit in the kitchen. The unseen tendency for violence is revealed and intensified through the violence prevalent in the alien culture. As M. Rajeshwar comments in his article on "Sado-Masochism as a Literary Device in Bharati Mukherjee's Wife" points out:

Dimple's ill concealed sado-masochistic compulsions are soon precipitated by the violence-ridden and individualistic American life and culminate in killing her husband. This psychic development in Dimple has been variously but uncritically viewed as her desperate effort to forget her Indian roots necessitated by the demands of American life and as her assertion of independence from her overbearing husband. (127)

Dimple is misled by the evil impact of American culture as she is used to watching TV shows depicting murder and violence. She turns neurotic and fails to discriminate between what she watches on television and what she experiences in real life. The violence in



America adds to the already existing inherent psychic traits of Dimple. Her character is endowed with some symbolic dimensions.

From the transformation of a humble and passive woman to a ruthless murderess of her husband, it is argued that Dimple always lives in a world of fantasy, a world which is conceived by herself. When she encounters the harsh realities of life, the state of her fancy is shattered. When all her delusions are crumbled, she is annoyed with herself, and starts despising everything around her. The idea of marriage – a symbol of happiness and new identity has been thwarted by Amit's unreciprocated love and overbearing attitude.

It is claimed by many critics that Dimple's gruesome murder of her husband has nothing to do with cultural shock. She does not fall a victim to the expatriate life but a victim of her own neurotic sensibility caused by popular advertisement fantasies. It is significant to note that Dimple hides from Amit her gradually disintegrating self, and she is fraught with disconcerting desires and indecisiveness. Her alienation is not rooted in loneliness, in isolation or cultural SS

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