



## BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S 'WIFE': A TALE OF MORAL AND CULTURAL SUICIDE

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### ABSTRACT



The idealized Indian culture holds its dignity and morality in its women. Since ages, woman in India is hailed as an epitome of sacrifice, devotion, faithfulness, extreme love and care. Resultant, traditional Indian society has been expecting woman to be silent, shy and submissive especially in the role of a daughter, wife and mother. But the phase is changed with the changing passage of time as the extreme impression of westernization and modernity have brought all ethical values, consecrations and morals almost to decline. In Bharati Mukherjee's 'WIFE' (1975), the character of Dimple is imbued with the same outlook and reactions that are born of mega-modern era. The picture of Dimple's life is completely a reverse to that of woman in old Indian mythology where there was pious Sita, known for her chastity and righteousness but here is Dimple who gets indifferent from her own husband and tries to seduce another man when she gets failure in feeding her fantasy world. There was Panna Dhai, known as a strong mother for her extreme sacrifice but here is Dimple who cruelly kills her own innocent unborn baby in her womb. There was faithful Savitri who brought her husband back to life, winning cleverly worded boon of Yama, the god of death but here is Dimple who murders her own husband in a filmy way, the same husband whom an ideal Indian woman considers to be her 'Swami' or 'Parmeshwar' (supreme soul) whose place is above all for her. Dimple does break this traditional role of women and so in this image break, the novel is found as a 'moral and cultural suicide'.

**Keywords:** *Modern Phase, Traditional Decline, Westernization*

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## INTRODUCTION

As the line suggests, "You can take the boy out of the country but you cannot take the country out of a boy"<sup>1</sup> similarly, Bharati Mukherjee too herself assimilates this fact somewhere that "changing citizenship is easy, swapping culture is not." Even Maya Manju Sharma, a critic on Mukherjee, calls her "essentially Hindu and essentially moral" but Dimple, the protagonist of the novel 'Wife' (Mukherjee's second novel and a finalist for Governor General's Award), proves herself totally uncultured and immoral. Throughout the novel, she finds herself as a "Nowhere Man" who is keen to know who she is and where she belongs to. She is somewhere found to be compared with Arun Joshi's Sindi and Anita Desai's Maya who remain in problems and suffer whole of their married life. They present woman's inner voice without articulation. Dimple is shown as an abnormal woman who is unable to adjust with anything in her new world. She does hate all that surrounds her. She does not seem to be capable of compromising with her married life. Out of her keen homesickness, she always seeks, even in America, the old world that of her father's. She almost tries to be an ideal better half of her husband without assimilating that this all is totally beyond the American aura. She decides not to take it anymore and once in utter frustration, she murders her own husband as a T.V. serial character. She kills herself also at the last, as the novel, from the beginning, is too destined to a tragic end. The infidelity and the murder which brings the novel to its shocking close are the alternatives with which Dimple's American experience has proved her.

The present paper is an attempt to assess the fact that Dimple not only murders her unborn baby and husband but she does murder her morals and culture too. The same motif is studied through dividing the story in three parts- Marriage-Miscarriage-Murder.

## MARRIAGE

Mukherjee opens her novel in a true Indian tradition of story-telling. The simple opening line- "Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon" is quite telling and at once sets the scene that anticipates something unnatural. For Dimple Dasgupta, neuro-surgeon is a very strange

choice. Mukherjee's choice of the name of the heroine as Dimple is a deliberate one and her intentions are quite explicit from the cover page of the novel where she quotes the OED definition of "Dimple" as -"any slight surface depression". From the very beginning, we feel that Dimple is far from normal girls. Dimple has nothing to do except thinking about marriage because she thinks that marriage is blessing in disguise. It will bring her freedom, fortune and perfect happiness:

Marriage would bring her freedom, Cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love.<sup>2</sup>

Dimple is twenty but she bewails for wasted years. Nothing pleases her more than the imagination about marrying a fellow who provides her all comforts. She is supposed to be studying for university examinations but books irritate her. At last, Mr. Dasgupta finds a suitable match for Dimple. Amit Basu, a Consultant Engineer, is the match for Dimple. He has already applied for immigration to Canada and U.S. and his job application is also pending in Kenya. Dimple is all ecstatic about her marriage and does a lot of shopping for celebrating the occasion. She comes to Amit's residence at Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road after her marriage. Basus are good people but their house is not so spacious and attractive and Dimple does not feel comfortable there. She does not like Amit's mother and sister also and her mother-in-law dislikes her name 'Dimple' and loves to call her 'Nandini' which simply infuriates the bride. However, Dimple thinks that all these problems are temporary and with the confirmation for immigration they will eventually come to an end.

Dimple Basu has always lived in a fantastic world which is created by herself. But when she confronts the harsh realities of life, the feathers of her imagination are clipped. For her, marriage meant, "being free and expressing yourself."<sup>3</sup> But instead of this all, Dimple finds that this marriage has robbed her of all romantic yearnings so tastefully nourished when she comes through the fact that this "marriage had betrayed her." Like Dimple in the personal life, Bharati too suffered the "isolation" of inter-racial marriage. In her marital relationship, Bharati, during



her stay in Calcutta with Blaise witnessed the Crisis of the adjustment in personal relationship. And it formed her impressions about gender imbalance operating in Indian society which she has mentioned on several occasions that Blaise was not able to understand the emotional crisis born out of the cultural conflict existing in the life of woman immigrants. Her emotional crisis is inter-racial marriage that became the basis of the creation of the expatriate sensibility, revealed in the same novel.

This all is a matter of great wonder how an Indian wife like Dimple can give up so early! As our Indian culture declares- *मुख्यो धर्मः स्मृतिषु विहितो भर्तृशुश्रूषानम हि* (women are enjoined to be of service to their husbands)<sup>4</sup>, but beyond it, modern Dimple has completely stopped chipping off bits of herself to please other, or to keep a relationship going. That's why her marital relations does not die its natural death, it is actually murdered by Dimple. Giving up on a marriage because you are not getting what you initially expected doesn't guarantee that you will get it in your next relationship. Dimple must have gone through the fact that Marriage is for better or for worse.

### MISCARRIAGE

Pregnancy is a boon for Indian women because they are supposed to maintain the continuity of the clan and they become "Shakti-incarnate". They are very source of 'creation'. If a woman fails to reproduce a child she is condemned and becomes an object of hatred in society. With the passing of time the excitement of marriage diminishes and Dimple becomes pregnant, a state known for vomiting tendency. However, her nauseating proneness is abnormal because she deliberately vomits and never leaves any opportunity of doing so at all hours of the day and night. She feels a strange sensation:

The vomit fascinated her. It was hers; she was locked in the bathroom expelling brownish liquid from her body. She took pride in brownish blossoms....(p.30)

Dimple is singular in her case when she thought of getting rid off "whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes."(p.31) Her killing of the

mice which looked pregnant also suggests that she does not feel at ease with her pregnancy. She becomes almost hysteric in killing that tiny creature without any rhyme and reason:

She pounded and pounded the baby clothes until a tiny gray creature ran out of the pile, leaving a faint trickle of blood on the linen. She chased it to the bathroom. She shut the door so it would not escape from her this time.... "I'll get you" she screamed. There is no way out of this, my friend ..." And in an outburst of hatred her body shuddering, her wrist taut with fury, she smashed the top of a small gray head. (p.35)

This act of killing is a manifestation of violence, smoldering inside her. Her repulsion with her own pregnancy is born out of her hatred for Amit who fails to feed her fantasy world.

Dimple is about to migrate but she does "not want to carry any relics from her old life" (p.42). She thinks that old things will remind her of frustrations and irritations. She counts her pregnancy also among the relics and ponders over the ways of getting rid of it. At last she decides to end it by skipping ropes. The description of her self-abortion is very 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 over her head, shoulders, over the tight little curve of her stomach. She had poured until the last of the blood washed off her legs; then she had collapsed. (p.42)

This is something which only Dimple can do and her self-abortion raises serious questions regarding her very womanhood. After terminating her pregnancy she hardly gives any after-thought to it. She never repents for the cruel deed she has committed by killing a prospective human life. She remains poised and dispassionate while it should have led her to an emotional upheaval. Rosanne Klass counts it as a serious mistake on Bharati



Mukherjee's part and questions her understanding of Indian culture. In a review of *Wife*, she comments:

For an Indian wife, childlessness is a disaster, pregnancy the achievement that seals her status. To overturn such ingrained values would involve a major emotional upheaval; yet Dimple acts on the vaguest and most undefined impulses, and thinks no more about it.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, Dimple's reactions have not been given due attention but it should be remembered that Dimple is simply an individual and her strange actions should not be equated with the values of Indian culture. In the very beginning, Mukherjee has hinted at Dimple's ill mental state. In the view of some critics Dimple's act of abortion "is a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood." But here, symbolically, by revoking her motherhood, Dimple liberates herself from the traditional role of a Hindu wife by becoming a mother of a child. Like the Western feminists, she asserts her will but her abortive act is kind of moral suicide.

#### **MURDER**

When Amit's confirmation for migration to U.S. comes, Dimple's happiness is inexpressible. She prepares well and sees to it that nothing she misses which is necessary for a new life. She feels like being freed from the brazen fetters of servile domesticity. . For her "real happiness was just in the movies or in the West." (p.47)

Amit's frustration is now obvious because he finds himself still jobless. Getting a job in America is not an easy task especially if you happen to be an Indian. If one gets an opportunity, it is very difficult to sustain it and you have to bear all sorts of humiliation and exploitation without giving any vent to it. Jyoti Sen teaches Amit all tricks of the trade, the code of conduct as an Indian professional in America, "Work twice as hard, keep your mouth shut and you'll be a millionaire in fifteen years." (p.56)

With the passage of time, Dimple starts breaking after the realization that she is deceived in marriage and a good-for-nothing husband like Amit will not cater to her dream world. She cannot

tolerate his snores anymore and insomnia becomes her accustomed habit. She, suddenly, realizes that "she hated the Sens' apartment, sofa-bed, and the wall to wall rug" (p.88). Amit's unemployment was the root cause of all troubles. She thinks that her marriage to Amit is a failure of her dreams:

She was bitter that marriage had betrayed her, had not provided all the glittery things she had imagined, had not brought her cocktails under canopied skies and three A.M. drives to dinzy restaurants where they sold divine Kababs rolled in roti. (pp.101-102)

Final movement is the climax marked by intense dramatic scene punctuated with Dimple's growing abnormality. She had always dreamt of a splendid apartment fully furnished and accomplished with all sorts of appliances. Marsha's flat is like a dream come true to her. However, the burden of responsibilities in terms of watering the plants and cleaning the kitchen, etc. is to her, greatly, annoying. Amit feels lonely and wishes if they could have shifted near the Sens. Quite often Dimple feels irritated even over-terrified. One day, while Amit is reading something she complains of exhaustion which he attributed to her meager diet. She loses her temper at this instance:

I feel sort of dead inside and you can do is read the paper and talk to me about food. You never listen; you have never listened to me. You hate me. Don't deny it; I know you do. You hate me because I'm not fat and fair. (p.110)

The furious outbursts of Dimple show her intensified and accumulated frustration. She is suffering from inferiority complex and thinks that she is not able to win her husband's love and affection. Amit may also be blamed for his ignorance of female psychology. He thinks that comforts are enough and hardly bothers about her emotional needs. He takes her out of four-walls very rarely and goes on admonishing instead:

You must go out, make friends, do something constructive, not stay at



home and think about Calcutta.

(p.111)

To be fair, it can be said about Dimple that her deficiencies in English could have hardly conducted herself well in the enormous city like New York on her own. America has outwitted her now and she is gripped by a sense of nostalgia. It is just beyond her understanding "how could she live in a country... where every other woman was a stranger, where she felt different, ignorant, exposed to ridicule in the elevator?"(p.112) Her whole world is limited to the four-walls of the apartment and media becomes her only friend.

Dimple finds life impossible "with the people who didn't understand about Durga Pujah" (p.114). For Indians, religion is an integral part of life and Dimple's failure at assimilation with America is due to a lack of 'shared-faith'. An expatriate is tenaciously conscious of preserving his identity even in most trying moments of life. In America, she realizes how easy it was to live, to communicate, and to share with people in Calcutta. She never felt frightened at the sight of the policemen whose faces were so friendly, but the scene has changed completely in the new environment :

She is scared of self-service elevators, of policemen of gadgets and appliances. She does not want to wear western clothes as she thinks she would be mistakenly taken for a Puerto Rican. She does not want to lose her identity but feels isolated, trapped alienated, marginalized.<sup>6</sup>

The greatest alter ego of a girl after marriage is her husband with whom she shares her inmost heart, but Dimple cannot do that. She keeps everything secret from Amit. At times when loneliness becomes unbearable, Dimple contemplates as many as seven ways of committing suicide. It seems as if she is in love with whatever is dark, evil, sinister, gruesome like murder, suicide, mugging which have become all fascinating words for her. Even her ways of getting rid of life are fanciful like a television advertisement. She cannot trust anybody but only media. Even "her own body seemed curiously alive to her, filled with hate,

malice, an insane desire to hurt, yet weightless almost airborne" (p.117). Linda Sandler accounts such feeling of 'emptiness' as follows:

She is uprooted from her family and her familiar world, and projected into a social vacuum where the media becomes her surrogate community, her global village. New York intensifies her frustrations and unhooks her further from reality...<sup>7</sup>

Her mind is always full of news about mugging and rape; she always feels that someone is breaking her window. When Amit points out her foolishness as they occupy the 14<sup>th</sup> floor, she retorts: "In America anything is possible. You can be raped and killed on any floor"(p.129).

As the novel advances to its end, we notice Dimple anxious to settle her scores with America. Her spirit rebels, she starts going out with Ina and Milt and enjoys all the prohibited freedom. This outing leaves her all the more confused. She turns neurotic and fails to differentiate between what she sees on T.V. and what she experiences herself in real life. She has numerous complaints against life:

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. It was as if some force was impelling her towards disaster, some monster had overtaken her body, a creature with serpentine curls and heaving bosom that would erupt indiscreetly through one of Dimple's orifices, leaving her, Dimple Basu, splattered like bug on the living- room wall and rug. The cataclysm embarrassed her. (p.156)

Dimple's gloom deepens with every passing day. She starts realizing: "Her life was slow, full of miscalculation" (p.178). Amit could only visualize the external changes in Dimple and he explains it as a case of "Culture-shock". He even promises to take



her to Calcutta. This does not prove helpful. Linda Sandler explains it in terms of her traditional upbringing, "Dimple is unable to make the transition from Before to After and chooses violence as a "problem- solving device". (Linda Sandler, p. 75)

Dimple starts contemplating the murder of her husband. The violence outside turns inside. She now fails to differentiate between what she sees on television and what she thinks. The idea of slaughtering her husband fascinates her. She thinks:

She would kill Amit and hide his body in the freezer. The extravagance of the scheme delighted her, made her feel very American somehow, almost like a character in a T.V. series. (p.195)

The problem with Amit is that "he lacked extravagance; he preserved in the immigrant virtues of caution and cunning" (p.195). He fails to mark the emotional cracking-up of Dimple. "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, something quite roughly, by children who claimed to love her"(p.212). The trouble with Dimple is that she loses touch with reality. Guilt of seducing Milt and also of keeping everything a secret from Amit vex her. She loses her sleep and becomes a sleep-walker like Lady Macbeth and ultimately kills Amit without actually thinking about its consequences:

She sneaked up on him and chose a spot, her favourite spot just under the hairline, where the mole was getting larger and browner, and she drew an imaginary line of kisses because she did not want him to think she was the impulsive, foolish sort who acted like a maniac just because the husband was suffering from insomnia. She touched the mole very lightly and let her fingers draw a 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 and would have embarrassed any advertiser, and

then she saw the head fall off- but of course it was her imagination because she was not sure any more what she had seen on TV and what she had seen in the private screen of three A.M.- and it stayed upright on the counter-top, still with its eyes averted from her face, and she said very loudly to the knife that was redder now than it had ever been when she had chopped chicken and mutton with it in the same kitchen and on the same counter.... Women on television got away with murder. (pp. 212-213)

The above description shows that it is a case of "cold-murder". By stabbing seven times it seems, Dimple frees herself from the marriage tie. This is the only act of assertion she can make. Some critics are of the view that Dimple's gruesome act has nothing to do with "cultural-shock". She is not a victim of "expatriation" but is instead, "a victim of her own neurotic sensibility fed on popular advertisement fantasies." Instead Dimple should have been made to realize that for an Indian wife, her husband is all – he is her breath and spirit and whatsoever may be his physical feature or achievement. He should be loved and respected, or utmost she should have ended her own life. But the violence that is passively lying in her spirit gets multiplied on coming to America where "talking about murder is like talking about weather" (p.161). It is American notion of freedom for women which makes her question if it is her own happiness and freedom. Her emotions which require an outlet and burst at last and she suffers feats of madness, nightmares, reveries and insomnia and what one can expect from such heroine. She, finally, gets the solution of her problems in murdering her husband. Thus, it is American modern culture which intensifies her confusion and turns the violence inside out and she ends up as a murderess. That is the main reason Dimple's actions right from her self-abortion to the murder of Amit fail to arouse our sympathy as an Indian turned American wife who lost all her values as Indian wife and murders Indian culture too. The paper attempts to assess the fact that Dimple breaks the image of an ideal and faithful Indian wife instead



becomes a murderess of her own baby and husband and kills herself too at last. Thus, Dimple's role in the novel declares this novel as a moral and cultural suicide.

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