

Frailty Thy Name is Woman- in Bharathi Mukherjee's Wife

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Abstract: *Post-colonial women writers writing within the margins of indigenous culture and feminism, therefore have an even more acute problem, since they have to confront the twin issues of legitimacy of feminine discourse in a patriarchal society and the nebulous cultural and social "space". They occupy in their efforts to situate their texts within the context of feminism. Mukherjee reiterates the marginalization of woman by exploring and exploding ways in which culture and ideology construct feminine identity. Dimple's mistaking the social circle of Indians for "cultural experience" prevents her from experiencing life on the outside that would shape her view of American Society. However, Dimple's analysis of her earliest encounter with American Society is from the perspective of her own cultural moorings.*

Keywords: *Frailty, weak, feminine identity, view, cultural experience*

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the immigrant women novelists of 90's in America Bharathi Mukherjee's prolific writings have won appreciable attention across the world. By employing a mode of social realism she has excelled her contemporaries in depicting the problems of immigrant women from India. Among all her novels *Wife* stands out as a unique fictional work by virtue of its insightful probing into its heroine's psyche and its indubitable technical excellence. Superficially, *Wife* is the simple story of Amit and his wife Dimple, newly married Bengali immigrants to the USA. Dimple's ill-concealed Sado-masochistic compulsions are soon precipitated by the violence ridden and individualistic American life which culminate in her killing of her own husband.

Dimple Das Gupta is the pliant, docile, obedient and submissive daughter of a middle class Bengali family: "She thought of pre-marital life as a dress rehearsal for actual living" (2) and Dimple initially believed that marriage "would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpet lawns, fund raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her low" (3). She is the naive daughter of a well-to-do upper middle class Indian professional. She oscillates between fear and fantasy, constantly worrying about her "Sitar-shaped body and rudimentary breasts" (4). Her notions of marriage are rather vague, derived as they are from the exaggerated art of Indian films, movie magazines, and the advice columns in "Ladies periodicals". The tension between her actual powerlessness and forms of freedom suggested to her by the changing Indian culture have made her sick. She reads "The Doctrine of Passive Resistance" for her university exams and expects to employ domestic passive resistance without holding affection, to win the love of the unknown husband, who is the only hope of adult freedom she has. At last she finds a matrimonial candidate, Amit Basu, a consulting engineer, who is ideal for her emigration. Her horoscope matches and she arranges marriage by means of ubiquitous matrimonial advertisements in ethnic newspapers and magazines insistently signifying the subordinated, passive role of a daughter brought up to obey male authority: "Discreet and Virgin, she waited for real life would begin" (13).

Dimple's psychic defect is implied in her name. Significantly the author has given the meaning of the word taken from Oxford English Dictionary: Dimple as any slight surface depression. With this psychic defect, she naturally reacts in a peevish way to all the things around her. In typical Indian fashion, Dimple moves in with her mother-in-law whom she loathes and soon becomes pregnant. She sees pregnancy as an impediment to her new beginning: "she began to think of the baby as unfinished business. It cluttered up the preparation for going abroad. She did not want to carry any relics from her old life. She does not like her new name either: 'The name just doesn't suit me' (18). She does not

love the house she lives in. The “Lace doilies are for her so degrading that she wishes she were back in her own room in Rash Behari Avenue” (30).

Dimple does not even love Amit, her husband when he takes her to *kwality*. She feels “He should have taken her to Trinca’s” (21). Dimple has a subterranean streak of violence. She is uprooted from her family and familiar world, and projected into a social vacuum where the media becomes her surrogate community, her global village. It is very unnatural for a normal girl to “enjoy” the sensation of vomiting and think of getting rid of “Whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes” (31). Dimple “gave vicious squeezes to her stomach as if to force a vile thing out of hiding” (30). The height of her abnormality reaches when she skips her way to abortion: “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. (42)

Jyothi Sen receives Dimple and Amit at Kennedy Airport. Dimple learns doing shopping in America. Dimple’s sense of her own identity and marginality frames all of her responses to her new environment, which consists generally Indians, mostly Bengalis. That the ethnography of Indians, including ‘Americanized’ Bengalis, constitutes “the experience of being abroad” is one of the many reversals of ideological positioning Mukherjee employs in *Wife*. When Jyothi and Amit discuss “guns and licenses” over dinner, Dimple “thought she had never really seen friends with anyone before this, never stayed with someone for weeks and discussed important things like love and death. That’s what America meant to her” (84-85). They went to a party near Manhattan near Columbia University. Vinod Khanna comments Dimple that she looked fresh and Un-Americanized. He offers a job as a sales girl to Dimple. Amit rejects this offer. For Dimple Mullick is more American than Americans. He is a chain smoker. She meets Milt Glassery.

Dimple encounters the horrific scenes of murder and violence in America where crime is the talk of the day, the rule of the land. It is in this pervasive ambience of crime that her feeling of guilt is mitigated. As M.Siva Rama Krishna says: “this pervasive atmosphere of crime dulls the edge of her own guilt” (*Indian Women Novelslists*, 73). She was glad that an elderly couple had been fatally shot on a fishing trip so that she did not have to feel guilty about Amit.

Dimple’s mistaking the social circle of Indians for “Cultural experience” prevents her from experiencing life on the outside that would shape her view of American society. However, Dimple’s analysis of her earliest encounter with American society is from the perspective of her own cultural mornings. Turned away from her request for “five hundred grams of cheese cake” (59) with the reminder that Schwartz’s is a Kosher deli, and does not sell “milk, cheese, sour cream” (60). Dimple thinks, “In Calcutta she’d be from Muslims, Biharis, Christians, Nepalis. She was used to many races; she’d never been a communalist . . . she was caught in the cross-fire of an American communalism she couldn’t understand. She felt she do come very close to getting killed in her third morning in America” (60). Her failed attempt at negotiating the cultural divide reiterates Dimple’s inability to find her “space” within the confines of an alien culture. That is, she can neither negotiate the cultural barrier nor find a voice that answers to her needs, that speaks for her, that discloses meaning for her in the chaos of her experience.

At the time of Interview Dimple ties the knot. It was her final maidenly accomplishment. He didn’t get job. Dimple thought a man without job was not a man at all. She thought of committing suicide in queens. Lack of communication stipples and chokes her voice and disintegrates her sensibility. It takes away the sanity of her mind. She has nightmares of violence, of suicide and of death. She has even the sensation of being raped and killed in her flat. She is haunted by the thoughts of illusion of committing suicide and the reality of butchering her husband. It is her nightmarish visions and dreams that highlight her latent impulses: “That night she had new dream; she was walking on the beach. A whale, a porpoise, a shark, she heard people say, She fought her way through a crowd that suddenly disappeared. At her feet lay Ina Mullick, in Dimple’s sari, a thin line of water spilling from her mouth” (103). Dimple thought that Amit is irresponsible towards her. She felt bored. She wants to dream but Amit does not provide her fantasy life. He was merely a provider of small comforts.

Amit is isolated from her since he fails to nourish her fantasies, turns away from her world of dreams and delusions, her neurotic pinnings and her eccentricities. Amit simply does not fit into her own world: “She thought marriage was a chancy business; it could easily have been Jyoti instead of Amit that she had married since both were of the same caste and both were engineers” (85).

Her dislike of Amit's ways of life makes her dislike the world around her and look at its cadaverously and neurotically: "She thought of sleeping bodies as Corpses" (97). Despair sets in. She begins to detest even the sanctity of her marital ties since "marriage had betrayed her, had not provided her all the glittery things she had imagined" (102). She even wanted to give up old friendships: "Because there was nothing to describe and nothing to preserve (120).

Dimple is perilously estranged from her own self. She is alien to it. It is herself alienation that breeds a terrible anguish in her and prompts her to murder her husband: "Her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, are in same desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne" (117). Even the apartment she lives in symbolizes the laceration of her psyche, its decay and degeneration. The T.V. becomes a diabolical trap, a torment without hope of either relief or release. It becomes an object of incarceration, a menagerie to her. She is immured in it, parting for release, an escape from T.V. Watching. Even the appointment objectifies this psychic decay and degeneration: "There were too many images of corrosion within the apartment" (127).

Dimple turns towards Ina, Leni and Milt Glasses in her moments of crises. Ina and Leni fail her as friends. Thus, when Dimple is seduced by Milk Glasses, her isolation and despair become even more acute. Dimple has committed the ultimate sacrilege, the betrayal of her gendered Indian culture: "She was so much worse off than ever, more lonely, more cut off from Amit, from the Indians, left only with borrowed disguises ...like a shadow without feelings" (200). Isolated from the world outside and disappointed in Amit who, unable to find a professional position, had taken to washing dishes, Dimple amuses: "Life should have treated her better, should have added and subtracted in different proportions so that she was not left with a Chimera" (156).

Dimple cogitates upon the nine ways of dying. Set fire to sari made of synthetic fibre; head in oven; nick wrist with broken glass in a sink full of scalding dish water; starve; fall on bread knife while thinking of Japanese Samurai revivals. While waiting on the platform for the train to arrive, she thinks of containers for husband's ashes, "Should he die a sudden death"? And wonders "What happened to the bits of bone and organs that were scanned but not totally consumed"? (168). It was becoming the voice of madness, and that leads to her decision to "Kill Amit and hide his body in the freezer" (195). She sneaked upon him and chose a spot, her favorite spot just under the hairline, where the mole was getting larger and browner. She brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times (213). Having thus killed Amit, Dimple has ultimately succeeded in achieving a medium of satisfaction for masochistic drives. She has turned the whole society into a punishing agent. Her descent into madness, in the final analysis is to be seen as both an affirmation and a denial of her identity as a victim of cultural displacement and patriarchal discourse.

Bharati Mukherjee, 'The clear eyed but affectionate immigrant in American society' (77), has become a celebrity for her distinctive approach to expatriatehood as a metaphysical experience of exile and as an agent of attitudinal change, both in the minority and majority cultures. Diasporal dream figures prominently in all her fiction, but its treatment after her settling in America seems to be more assured and more comprehensive in its coverage of the many moods of expatriation - nostalgia, frustration and hope than in the Canadian phase of her life where uncertainty and despondency prevailed.

Dimple the protagonist in Wife is an extremely immature girl who constantly dreams of marriage as she hopes that it would bring freedom and love. After her excruciatingly painful and desperately waiting she is finally married to Amit Kumar Basu. Bharati Mukherjee presents the world of Dimple, a world of day - dreams and nightmares and her morbid psyche through a series of grotesque images. F.A. Inamdar in his article "Immigrant Lives: Protagonists in Bharati Mukherjee's The Tiger's Daughter & Wife" says that if the jacket of the novel claims its theme to be docility and submissiveness in Dimple, it is a thematic failure. Dimple has been portrayed free and rebelling throughout the novel. She has no inhibition in expressing whatever she feels. On the contrary, it is Amit Basu who is a victim in India as also in New York. His character signifies how an innocent, duty-conscious husband falls a prey to the neurotic madness of his wife. He says that, Dimple is a troubled spirit, belonging nowhere in the end. It could be said that Mukherjee's novels are truly English and not Indian alone. Brahma Dutta Sharma and Susheel Kumar Sharma in their combined article: "The Contribution of women to the Development of the Indian English Novel" says: "contemporary Indian English Novel has observed Mukherjee's Wife has focused on the problem of adjustment that Indians living in the West have to face.

In Dimple's initial expectations of a change in her marriage status and in anticipation of new experiences in the United States, Mukherjee indicates the dilemma of the Indian Woman whose social race, by tradition, is defined by a patriarchally encoded culture. In a patriarchal culture marriages arranged by fathers leads to the assumption of by the husbands over the wives. The wife is expected to subsume her individual and private identity. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman writer and the 19th century Literary Imagination (2000) wrote, "women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to mere properties" (12). Dimple is an object whose subjective self conforms to and is confirmed by male ideology and discourse.

Shyam M. Ansari, in an article "Identity Crisis of Indian Immigrants: A Study of three novels" has interpreted Mukherjee's Wife from the perspective of identity dilemma. Ansari has opined that, Wife is about displacement and alienation, for it portrays the psychological claustrophobia and the resultant destructive tendencies of Dimple Das Gupta. S. Sujatha in her article, "The Theme of Disintegration: A comparative study of Anita Desai's Cry, the Peacock and Bharati Mukherjee's Wife has said that, Mukherjee's Wife suggests that Dimple's predicament transcends that an individual enmeshed in the limbo of cultural shock. M.Rajeswari, in his essay, "Sado-Masochism as a literary Device in Bharathi Mukherjee's Wife has observed the novel from the perspective of its protagonists" ill-concealed Sudo-Masochistic compulsions, which are soon precipitated by the violence-ridden and individualistic American life and culminate in her killing of her husband.

Dimple's sense of her own identity and marginality frames all of her responses to her new environment, which consists generally of Indian's mostly Bengalis. That the ethnography of Indians including "Americanized" Bengalis, constitutes "the experience of being abroad" is one of the many reversals of ideological positioning Mukherjee employs in Wife. Dimple has never had a positive vision of any kind. Even her parents remain flat characters. Her world is dominated not by the varied sounds and colours of nature but by the colourful romance that is projected in the advertisements and the stories of magazines. Even as an immigrant in America, she does not have any longing for her home. The only thing that excited her is the news from Calcutta about the romantic escapades of her friend Prixie.

Christine Gomez in his article "The on-going quest of Bharati Mukherjee from expatriation to Immigration" opines that Dimple shares the expatriate characteristic of being ill at ease both in the native culture and in the alien one. In it, not only is expatriation a major theme, but also it becomes a metaphor for deeper levels of alienation like existential alienation and self-estrangement. Expatriation is actually a complete state of mind and emotion which includes a wistful longing for the past, often symbolized by the ancestral home, the pain of exile and homelessness, the struggle to maintain the difference between oneself and the new, unfriendly surroundings, an assumption of moral or cultural superiority over the host country and a refusal to accept the identity forced on one by the environment. The expatriate builds a cocoon around herself/himself as refuse from cultural dilemmas and from the experienced hostility or unfriendliness in the new country. This is revealed in some significant images used in the novel. In Wife, the cage is an important symbol. It stands for a comfortable but restricted existence, for isolation and a denial of freedom. It is significant that Dimple kills her husband after watching a T.V. Programme in which a birdcage figured prominently.

Dimple's vision of Sita's docility, sacrifice and responsibility is a flag with many messages. She wants to break through the traditional taboos of a wife. She aspires for freedom and love in marriage. This aim brings her indignation, grief, resentment, peevishness, spite and sterile anger. Dimple is trapped between two cultures and aspires to a third, imagined world. Living in her social vacuum, Dimple is not unlike hundreds of American men and women who believe and are betrayed by the promise of fulfillment offered by the media, and who choose the solution suggested by a violent environment. Prasanna Sri Sathupati in her essay "Psychotic Violence of Dimple in wife" points out that Dimple is not docile and submissive, she is free and rebelling throughout the novel. Rather, it is Amit Basu who is a victim in India as also in New York. His murder signifies how an innocent duty conscious husband falls a prey to the neurotic madness of his wife.

2. CONCLUSION

Dimple's subservience reiterates a culture and ideology that denies her the right to personal feelings and desires that serve her own interests, and which would allow her to forge her own identity. Brought up to defer with her father/husbands final authority to examine and judge her every emotion and

behavior, she cannot serve as an agent of change on her own behalf, because she cannot comprehend any reason to justify her feelings. Thus, when Dimple is reduced by Milt Glasser, her isolation and despair become even more acute. Dimple has committed the ultimate sacrilege, the betrayal of her gendered Indian culture. Gayatri Spivak notes that, "The will to explain is a symptom of the desire to have a self and a world . . . the possibility of explanation carries the presupposition of an explainable universe and an explaining subject" (11). The dissolution of Dimple's mind, climaxing in her violent act, may be best understood in light of Michael Foucault's analysis of madness in Madness and Civilization (1965). Foucault says that "we must try to return, in history, to that zero point in the course of madness at which madness is an undifferentiated experience, a note yet divided experience of division itself" (MC IX). Dimple's murder of Amit in Wife may be viewed as that moment of dissolution.

In her distorted view of reality, her delirium, Dimple imagines Amit's head transposed onto the television set, an image, that reiterates Foucault's concept of "the culmination of the void" (MC 107). This point of disjunction, both from cultural and feminist perspectives, is precisely what Bharati Mukherjee discloses in Wife. Dimple's madness stems from her resistance to male ideology and to her own and an alien culture, from which she forcibly disengages herself. Her violent act may be seen as an expression of her anguish and desire that lie outside the rule of reason.

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