

A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *WIFE*

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ABSTRACT

Mukherjee in the novel *Wife* deals with the neurotic phenomena in the protagonist Dimple. The fiction gives a profound psychological insight into Dimple's inner world. She always prefers to live in a world of fantasy than face the realities of life. Whenever her expectations are thwarted she feels depressed. She thinks that by emigrating to America she can experience a rich and sophisticated life but she experiences humiliation, loneliness and marginalization as an immigrant which makes her behave abnormally. Unable to communicate her problems to her husband, she goes to the extent of murdering him. Whenever Dimple tried to convey her problems Amit exhibited a wall of indifference. The novel concludes with Dimple imagining Amit's partially severed head on the dining table as she starts watching TV. The margin between rationality and irrationality gets diffused and results in a violent act of murder. Dimple loses her sanity because she was alienated and marginalized in her indigenous culture and faced the same predicament in the host culture.

KEYWORDS: Novel, Bharti Mukherjee

INTRODUCTION

Bharti Mukherjee in the novel *Wife* deals with the neurotic phenomena in the protagonist Dimple. The fiction gives a profound psychological insight into Dimple's inner world. She always prefers to live in a world of fantasy than face the realities of life. Whenever her expectations are thwarted she feels depressed. She thinks that by migrating to America she can experience a rich and sophisticated life but she experiences humiliation, loneliness and marginalization as an immigrant which makes her behave abnormally.

Gerald Graff and Bruce Robbins observe, the "conflict between culture in the anthropological sense and culture in the normative sense leads to a third way of using the term, one that refers neither to a people's organic way of life nor to the normative values preached by leading intellectuals but to a battleground of social conflicts and contradictions." (421) Dimple had to compromise between her desires and what life provided. She wanted to marry a neurosurgeon and fantasized a love life she saw in the films. Her father selected Amit Basu, an engineer who is aspiring to migrate to USA as Dimple's life partner. Dimple thinks, "Marriage would bring her freedom, Cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love" (WF 3). After marriage Dimple moves to her Mother-in-law's house. She is given a new name 'Nandini' after marriage. Giving her a new name is an attempt at annihilating her personality and an instance of patriarchal dominance. Amit fails to fulfill her expectations. She tries to console herself by creating a fantasy world. "She borrowed a forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips, eyes and chin from a body builder and shoulders ad, the stomach and legs from a trousers ad and put the ideal man" (WF 23).

Meanwhile Dimple becomes pregnant, she considers her pregnancy as an impediment from emigrating to America. She thinks America to open up a new vista to prosperity. "She thought of ways to get rid of Whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes" (WF 31). She was sick of vomiting. She finds a way of expressing her self-hatred by

killing a rat. She pounded and pounded the baby clothes until a tiny gray creature ran out of the pipe, 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. (WF 35)

As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note, "Women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to mere properties." (12) Dimple is desperate to escape from the clutches of Indian culture where in a woman has to be always subversive and experience new freedom in the USA. Thus she goes to the extent of inducing 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. (WF 42)

Amit and Dimple migrate to USA and they stay with Jyoti Sen's family. Amit and Jyoti always talk about violence and murder. Dimple creates a wrong notion about American society. Dimple is again confined to the house in Sen's apartment. Once she goes out to purchase groceries but comes back terrified. She feels like a fish out of water. The Shop man still stared. "You think I don't know grams, lady? She bit her lip." Grams, Pounds, you think I care? What I care about, lady, is breaking the law. Tell me-you want I should break the law? "No I didn't know the law," she said. He was reaching under the counter, for a gun, Dimple thought. I've insulted him; I will stand here numbly and be shot. (WF 59)

Dimple's failure to negotiate in the market makes her poignantly feel an alien. Dimple thinks, "In Calcutta she'd buy from Muslims, Biharis, Christians, Nepalis. She was used to many races; she'd never been a communalist.... She was caught in the crossfire of an American communalism she couldn't understand. She felt she'd come very close to getting killed on her third morning in America" (60).

Dimple and Amit attend a party where they happen to meet many Indian immigrants. Jyoti told Dimple not to restrict herself to Bengalis, or else she'd miss a lot of the experience of being abroad. Dimple is introduced to Ina Mullick, a "liberated" housewife who is "more American than Americans" (68), Dimple is awed by her air of sophistication, her command of English, and her "Women's Lib" advice to "crack the whip" (76). When Ina offers her a "weak gin," Dimple felt:

Amit was waiting for just the right answer, that it was up to her to uphold Bengali womanhood, marriage, and male pride. The right answer, *I do not need stimulants to feel happy in my husband's presence ... my obligation is to my husband*, seemed to dance before her eyes as though it were printed on a card. All she had to do was read it, but she feared Ina's laughter, or anger, more than anything in the world. If she took a drink she knew Amit would write it to his mother and his mother would call the Dasguptas and accuse them of raising an immoral and drunken daughter. The Calcutta rumor mill operated as effectively from New York as it did from Park Street. (78)

Dimple's dilemma is evident of the cultural clash she faces. She is caught in between the patriarchal Indian culture and liberated American culture she yearns for. Dimple starts hating everything Indian and wants to become completely assimilated into American culture. Dimple gets frustrated for Amit is unable to find a job. Dimple stays at home doing the household chores and watching TV channels often related to murder and violence. She constantly fears that her dream of a rich sophisticated life would crumble to pieces. Her fear of failure turns her insomniac. Amit is unaware of the trauma Dimple is undergoing. She suddenly realizes that "she hated the Sens apartment, Sofa-bed, the wall to wall

rug "(WF 88). She feels that Amit had betrayed her: "She wanted Amit to be infallible, intractable, godlike, but with boyish charm; wanted him to find a job so that after a decent number of years he could take his savings and retire with her to three-storey house in Bally gunge Park" (WF 89). Dimple is lonely has no one to share her pains and to console her. She enters a phase of acute depression and self-hatred. "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" (WF101- 102). Without the security of a job the immigrant has no security of home or future. The pain of isolation, loneliness, unfamiliarity, inferiority complex leads to fragmentation of the self. She fails to balance the difference between her desire and reality. Being pressurized by Amit's failure to find a job, she starts brooding over "seven ways to commit suicide" (WF102).

Amit gets a job and they move to their own apartment. Instead of feeling happy Dimple 's loneliness makes her sick. Throughout the day she is imprisoned within the house She says to Amit, "I feel sort of dead inside and you can do is read the paper and talk to me about food. You never listen; you've 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"(WF 110). Dimple becomes neurotic as she is unable to differentiate between reality and her dreams. Amit fails to recognize the severity of Dimple's situation. Amit advises her to make friends. He doesn't encourage her to take up a job and to be independent. He thinks a woman would be contented and happy at home, he fails to understand the emotional turmoil she is undergoing.

The reaction to the deteriorating process can also be stark. And, considering the formidable danger of self-destructiveness, this reaction is completely adequate as long as one continues to feel a helpless prey to these merciless forces. In dreams and associations, they may appear in many succinct symbols, such as a homicidal maniac, Dracula, monsters, a white whale, or ghosts. This terror is the nucleus of many fears otherwise inexplicable, such as the fear of the unknown and the dangerous depth of the fear, fear of the ghosts, of anything mysterious. (Horney 153)

Dimple contemplates several ways of committing suicide. Television becomes the only connection she has with the real world. Even " her own body seemed alien to her, filled with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne" (WF117). In a Mullick brings her American friends to Dimple's apartment for a get together. "To Dimple they all looked alike; even their clothes were similar. She felt too shy to talk to them"(WF, 146). Somehow she manages and starts going out with Ina and Milt. She wears Marsha's pants and tries to taste the prohibited freedom. She seduces Milt and keeps it a secret from Amit. Dimple becomes more confused as she has done a sacrilege to 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 ... living like a shadow without feelings" (200) She becomes addicted to television and fails to differentiate between the violent scenes on the T.V screen and real life experiences. 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 embraced her. (WF 156)

Dimple thinks that, "Her life was slow, full of miscalculations" (WF 178). As she thinks that she fails in everything, she decides to murder her husband. The idea of murdering 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 "(WF 195). The problem with Amit is that "he lacked extravagance; he preserved in the immigrant virtues of caution and cunning" (WF 195).

She sneaked upon 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 around the detectable spot, then she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical 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 T.V 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. (WF 212-213)

Unable to communicate her problems to her husband, she goes to the extent of murdering him. Whenever Dimple tried to convey her problems Amit exhibited a wall of indifference. The novel concludes with Dimple imagining Amit's partially severed head on the dining table as she starts watching TV. The margin between rationality and irrationality gets diffused and results in a violent act of murder. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," as Mary A. Hill notes, "Gilman presents insanity as a form of rebellion, a crucial turning point toward independence." (151) Dimple loses her sanity because she was alienated and marginalized in her indigenous culture and faced the same predicament in the host culture.

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