

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

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**Abstract:** Women in post-colonial settings writers working on the outskirts of indigenous culture and feminism face an even greater challenge, as they must contend with the twin concerns of feminine discourse's legitimacy in a patriarchal society and the ambiguous cultural and social "space. "They take up space in their attempts to place their texts in the perspective of feminism. Mukherjee's book reaffirms women's marginalization by delving into and deconstructing the manner in which culture and ideology shape feminine identity. Dimple's misunderstanding of Indians' social circle as "cultural experience" hinders her from seeing life outside of the Indian community, which would change her vision of American society. Dimple, on the other hand, examines her first interaction with American society through the lens of her own cultural moorings. Positions in a patriarchal culture controlled by men

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Bharathi Mukherjee's prolific writings have garnered worldwide notice among the immigrant women novelists of the 1990s in America. She outperformed her contemporary's illustrating the hardships of immigrant women from India by using a social realism method. *Wife* stands out among her novels as a one-of-a-kind fictional work due to its profound probe into the psychology of its heroine and undeniable technical perfection. *Wife* is a simple narrative of Amit and his wife Dimple, who are newly married Bengali immigrants to the United States. The violence-ridden and individualistic American society eventually precipitates Dimple's ill-concealed Sado-masochistic compulsions, culminating in her murdering her husband. (Manikandan et.al., 2016, Sethuraman et.al., 2016, Senthil Thambi et.al., 2016).

### SUFFERINGS OF LIFE

Dimple Das Gupta is the 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 thought that marriage "would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpet lawns, and fund-raising dinners for noble charities." "She'd plummet if she married" (3). She is the naive daughter of a well-to-do Indian professional in the upper middle class. She alternates between dread and fantasy, fretting about her "Sitar-shaped figure and primitive breasts" all of the time (4). Her ideas about marriage are hazy, influenced by exaggerated art in Indian films, cinema magazines, and advice columns in "Ladies Magazines." The tensions 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, must gain the heart of an unknown husband, who is her only hope for adult liberty. Finally, she meets Amit Basu, a consultant engineer, who is the perfect match for her emigration. "Discreet and Virgin, she waited for real life to begin" Her horoscope matches,

and she arranges marriage through widespread matrimonial adverts in ethnic newspapers and magazines, insistently symbolizing the subjugated, passive attitude of a daughter brought up. (Vasanthi and Jeganathan 2007, Vasanthi et.al., 2008, Raajasubramanian et.al., 2011, Jeganathan et.al., 2012, 2014, Sridhar et.al., 2012, Gunaselvi et.al., 2014, Premalatha et.al., 2015, Seshadri et.al., 2015, Shakila et.al., 2015, Ashok et.al., 2016, Satheesh Kumar et.al., 2016).

Dimple's psychic flaw is hinted at by her name. The author has presented the definition of the word "dimple" derived from the Oxford English Dictionary: "dimple" is defined as "any tiny surface depression." Due to this psychological weakness, she reacts to everything around her in a peevish manner. Dimple, in classic Indian tradition, moves home with her mother-in-law, whom she despises, and becomes pregnant soon after. Pregnancy is a hindrance to her fresh beginning for her: "she started to think of the baby as unfinished business." It slowed down the process of preparing for a trip overseas. She didn't want to bring any artifacts from her previous life with her. She dislikes her new moniker as well: "The name just doesn't suit me" (18). She despises her current residence.

"She wishes she could be back in her own flat on Rash Behari Avenue," she explains, "because lace doilies are so humiliating to her" (30). When Amit, Dimple's husband, takes her to quality, Dimple doesn't like him. "He should have brought her to Trinca's," she believes (21). Dimple has a violent streak that runs deep beneath the surface. She is torn away from her family and familiar surroundings and thrust into a social vacuum in which the media serves as a substitute community, a worldwide village. It's unusual for a normal girl to "like" the sensation of vomiting and fantasise about getting rid of "Whatever it was that had clogged her tubes and pipes" (31). "As if to drive a foul monster out of hiding," Dimple "gave violent squeezes to her stomach" (30). Her oddity reaches its pinnacle as she jumps rope on her approach to an abortion: "She had skipped rope till her legs were long enough. 'number 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 senses of her 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's 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.

In America, where crime is the buzz of the town and the rule of law, Dimple witnesses horrifying scenes of murder and brutality. Her sense of guilt is alleviated by the pervasive atmosphere of criminality. "This pervasive culture of crime dulls the edge of her own guilt," M. Siva Rama Krishna argues. 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 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, and

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 robs her of her mental sanity. She suffers violent, suicidal, and death nightmares. In her flat, she even had the sensation of being raped and murdered. Her thoughts alternate between the fantasy of suicide and the reality of killing her spouse. Her latent tendencies are highlighted by her frightening visions and dreams: "She had a new dream that night; she was wandering on the beach." She heard people mention a whale, a porpoise, and a shark as she fought her way through a mob that abruptly vanished. Ina Mullick, dressed in Dimple's sari, lay at her feet, a tiny line of water running from her mouth" (103). Amit, Dimple believed, was irresponsible towards her. She was uninterested. She wishes to fantasies, but Amit does not allow her to do so. He was only a source of minor pleasures. 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 it cadaverously and neurotically: "She thought of sleeping bodies as Corpses" (97). Despair sets in. She begins to test 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 her self-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, and 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, a 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, lonelier, 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 the 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. Bharathi Mukherjee’s, “The Cleareyed but affectionate immigrant in American society” (77), has become a celebrity for her distinctive approach to expatriate hood 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. Bharathi Mukherjee’s presents the world of Dimple, a world of day-dreams and nightmares and her morbid psychethrough a series of grotesque images.

F.A. Inamdar in his article “Immigrant Lives: Protagonists in Bharathi Mukherjee’s *The Tiger’s Daughter* & *Wife*” says that if the jacket of the novel claims it 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 two 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.

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 colorful 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 ongoing quest of Bharathi Mukherjee’s 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 a refuge 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 bird cage 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's 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 right to personal feelings and desires that serve her interests, and which would allow her to forge her identity.

Brought up to defer with her father/husband's 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 not 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 Bharathi Mukherjee's 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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