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THIRD SPACE AND CULTURAL COLLISION IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *WIFE*



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ABSTRACT

The world is shrinking into global village. Migration and immigration has led to melt the differences of various communities, race, class and religion to form one entity and frame the phrase of University in Diversity. For America it is well known as Melting Pot. The postcolonial diaspora of the mid – to the late twentieth century forms an important dimension of the postcolonial engagement with the globalization of cultures. It aims to deal with hybridity and globalized culture.

With the advent of Science and Technology, people have started migrating to different countries in order to achieve their aims and ambitions. Indians in considerable numbers have migrated to the U.S. after the liberalized 1965 Immigration Act to fulfill their dreams. The post - 1965 Indian

immigrants are educated, middle class professional and have trended to develop inter-cultural and inter-racial awareness.

The Indian-born, Bengali origin, American Novelist Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* is the story of a young Indian woman who experiences cultural conflict both in and out of her own culture. This paper will shed light on the inter section of Western and Indian sub continental cultures with in the third space and the impact of cultural collisions on the character. It will further explore the drastic outcome of cross cultural confrontation of Dimple's inner struggle of identity in the context of her immigrant status ultimately resulting tragic response to loneliness and alienation, non-adaptability, and non-assimilation.

KEYWORDS

Indian culture, Americanization, Alienation, Identity, Third Space

RESEARCH PAPER

The world is shrinking into global village. Migration and immigration has led to melt the differences of various communities, race, class and religion to form one entity and frame the phrase of University in Diversity. For America it is well known as Melting Pot. The postcolonial diaspora of the mid – to the late twentieth century forms an important dimension of the postcolonial engagement with the globalization of cultures. It aims to deal with hybridity and globalized culture.

With the advent of Science and Technology, people have started migrating to different countries in order to achieve their aims and ambitions. Indians in considerable numbers have migrated to the U.S. after the liberalized 1965 Immigration Act to fulfill their dreams. The post - 1965 Indian immigrants are educated, middle class professional and have trended to develop inter-cultural and inter-racial awareness.

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the well-known writers of the Indian Diaspora in the United States whose literary task is to express a complex, cross-cultural sensibility, and who belongs to two different cultures and traditions. Dislocation, cultural alienation, survival, and adaptability remain persistent themes in her fiction. Her novels are further critically analyzed on the theme of migration, expatriation, exile, alienation and assimilation, along with concepts propounded by the post-colonial critic Homi Bhabha such as - hybridity and third space. Since Bharathi Mukherjee's women characters are the victims of immigration, all the critics focus her novels as

problems and consequences due to immigration but actually the problems are not because they are immigrants but because the women characters fight for their rights as a woman and then as an individual. She has tried to create a new relationship between man and woman based on equality, non-oppression, non-exploitation so that the creative potentials of both are maximized as individuals and not gender dichotomies. Her novels also focus on the changing psychological realities of female characters. An interesting preoccupation of this writer appears to be delving into the complex depths of the Indian psyche and showing its relation to society. The characters are shown as grappling on the one hand with the changed realities of Indian life and the trauma they entail and on the other hand with the psychic conflicts of personal origin. From her childhood, Mukherjee was in touch with the western culture and hence experiences the culture shock. She is torn between the two cultures of the East and the West. This conflict is reflected in all most all her works and has constituted the main concern of her writings. Though, an Indian, she is brought up in the western background. She is considered as an ethnic artist who looks beyond the immigrant's sense of alienation and dislocation to trace 'psychological transformation'.

Cross-cultural collision is a world phenomenon today and has received a prominent impetus. With the onset of globalization, multiculturalism and intercultural interactions have become inevitable among people across the globe. The advancements in the field of industry, education, information and technology have prompted people to travel around and settle in various countries. They quite often try their best to forge a workable synthesis between their native culture and that of the new set-up. When a person adopts a new culture by leaving his own culture, his old values may come into conflict with the new ones. This difference between two ways of life may even lead to a feeling of alienation, depression and frustration. Above all, as this process is not a smooth one most of the time results in some psychological eccentricities alien to both cultures.

In her second novel *Wife*, the protagonist Dimple wants to break the traditional taboos of a wife. This novel tells the story of Dimple, a seemingly docile young Bengali girl who, as any other normal girl, is full of dreams about her married life and so she eagerly and impatiently waits for marriage. She marries Amit Basu. She visualizes a new life for herself in America where Amit is expecting to immigrate.

Dimple Das Gupta, the protagonist of Mukherjee's *Wife*, has colorful dreams about marriage. She dreams of marrying a neurosurgeon and hopes that—"Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund raising dinners for notable charities. Marriage would bring her love" (1).

With these dreams after her desperate waiting finally, she enters the wedlock with Amit Basu, an engineer who is about to migrate to the United States. Her mother-in-law wants to call her Nandini and not Dimple. The change of her name is just a small thing for Amit but to Dimple it is "everything". Her christening as Nandini is the first estrangement from her identity. Soon after getting married, Dimple comes closer to reality which shatters all her dreams. Amit, she realises is not the man of her dreams.

America as a passion of people all over the world is full of migrants. The migrated people find it difficult to adjust with the new culture and undergo cultural transformation. In this process, they lose their roots of their native culture. To a large extent, they live in homogeneous communities, isolated from the mainstream white culture. But once they land on an alien land, they confront a new sociocultural environment. Dimple after landing in America is expected to play the role of an ideal Indian wife, stay at home and keep the house for the husband. Her frustration is built up gradually by the circumstances. She resents being wife in the Basu family and rebels against wifedom in many ways. One such way is here including a miscarriage by skipping herself free from her pregnancy, which she views as a Basu's property even in her womb. She aspires for self-recognition and dream fulfillment. This act of abortion is a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood. It symbolically shows that she tries to free herself from the traditional role of a Hindu wife and asserting her will. She hopes that her new life will begin in the new world. "I want everything to be nice and a new", she informs Pixie on the phone (41).

Unfortunately, one day in order to avoid his involvement in a bribery case, Amit resigns and soon, the couple migrates to New York where they stay at Jyoti and Meena Sen's house. During this early phase of life Dimple is not happy. Often she is struck by mental disorder. Amit's delay in getting job frustrates her. The conflict between the protagonist's drive towards a recreation of self and her position as a wife and a member of the small Indian immigrant community is illustrated in the sudden physical isolation that marks the beginning of Dimple's life in New York. Instead of the freedom she has associated with marriage and America, her life is limited to

the private space of the home much more than in Calcutta. Mukherjee invests her immigrant characters with a kind of self-excluding attitude, a desire to remain culturally and socially isolated from American society even when extracting a financially better future from it.

On the other hand Basu behaves in a different way. He wants her to be docile and submissive which makes Dimple indifferent to Basu and his behavior. He needs her only for sexual harassment which she feels as a sort of disrespect and starts feeling guilty. Dejected Dimple leads a lonely life of assisting Meena Sen, watching T.V or reading newspaper. Through media she is introduced to violence. Added to this she hears about more murder. There were frequent announcements of murders in newspapers, car radio and in casual conversations. She constantly lives in fear of the unknown. Talking about murders in America was like talking about the weather. She contemplates violence and killing. An American divorces her husband for snoring. Even the American cinema displayed only sex and violence. Evidently, Dimple is caught in a tradition of passivity, female treachery and covert violence. Many more news about American's barbarous acts of violence, sex and bloodshed do not go without frightening and corrupting Dimple. This, in fact, leads her to murder her husband later. Dimple's psychological imbalances, her immoderate daytime sleeping, her nightmares, and her indecisiveness- everything remains unknown to him up to his dying day. Actually the psychic disturbance begins quite early in Dimple's life that is with the delay in her marriage which made her very nervous and anxious.

The art of communication between husband and wife is essential to marital happiness. After getting exposed to the alien culture, Amit and Dimple fail to communicate with each other. This has a telling effect upon their relationship. This failure in communication develops a breach between the couple which widens day by day and ultimately ruins their relationship. The situation worsens when Amit gets a job. He fails to understand Dimple. He believes providing material comforts alone will make her happy. The couple moves to another flat – a well furnished apartment with all sorts of modern appliances. The living condition of the couple improves, yet they feel lonely. America has outwitted her and now she is gripped by a sense of nostalgia. Dimple's disgust with American English and American system gets accentuated even by small things. She is afraid to operate the self service elevators. She has to live within the four walls of the apartment. TV is all her cosmos where she watches endless violence and murder. She hates American English and American system of life. She indulges in a sense of nostalgia thinking about her peaceful life at Calcutta with her friends. She finds it difficult to share her

inmost heart even to her husband. Thus she suffers from abnormality of mind and from the crisis of culture. Dimple not only suffers from culture shock but also from inferiority complex and thinks that she is not able to win her husband's love and affection.

Dimple finds life impossible with the people who didn't understand about Durga Pujah. 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. Within the circle of Indian immigrants too, Dimple finds herself an alien. The Indians in America who have adjusted themselves to the American ways of life make her feel an outsider. In her own community too she fails to relate and experiences rejection. She is unable to move beyond the past, despite her willingness to engage in the present; she cannot anchor her new life starting from a "usable" past. She cannot use racist discrimination experienced in a Queens shop, gender discrimination at home, and class discrimination at meetings with white feminists as tools to empower herself.

The idea of murdering her husband ironically makes Dimple feel very American somehow, almost like a character in T.V serial. And her American frenzy accomplishes her wish. Dimple has not been able to adjust to the familial circumstances. She is alienated from her husband who, as a careerist, is hankering after lucrative jobs. Despair sets in her life. Amit has no time for her. Born out of this frustration are her seven ways of committing suicide in Queens. From her suicidal thoughts springs the idea of murdering her husband. She feels that she would have been a very different person if she had married someone else who unlike Amit would have altered her and showed all affection and attention on her. This isolation and emotional starvation starts the process of her psychological disintegration. From the sleep walking stage, feeded also by the violence propagated by her friends and the mass media, to the fulfillment of her criminal plan, there is a small step. After having a quite innocent illicit relationship with Milt Glasser whom she likes, because he builds up a bit of confidence in her, she kills her husband by stabbing him seven times, is symbolically related to apparent repudiation of the Hindu marriage bond signified by the seven ritual steps taken by the couple at the time of marriage. In killing Amit, Dimple offers no hope for a new beginning. The act results in disappointment as she realizes that she cannot perform America either by having sex with an American or in marriage to Amit. Dimple

does however not fail, completely because she acts and asserts her individuality apart from the role governed by a cultural history: “Individual initiative, that’s what it came down to,” she finally realizes, “and her life had been devoted only to pleasing others, not herself” (212). Mukherjee acknowledges that Dimple’s immigration has been one of “misguided Americanization”, but in the end Dimple finally transforms not into an Indian in America, nor into an American, but into an American with an Indian past.

She is further shaken with the knowledge that America with all its outward glitter allows Indian wives only to create “little Indians” around them but does not allow them either freedom or fulfillment as evident in the case of Ina Mullick who, despite her attempts at becoming a total American remains a frustrated individual. After this disturbing realization Dimple sinks into a world of isolation, unable to welcome the bright prospect of setting up a new home even after Amit gets a job. After a few pathetic attempts to merge herself into the new Dimple experiences total estrangement from herself and her surroundings as well. Torn by the conflict between her fantasy world and the reality of her situation, she allows her mind to be totally conditioned by the commercials on T.V. and magazines so much so she loses the ability to distinguish them from the world of reality. When she fails to relate to the real world, she tries to relate to the unreal world shown on the T.V. But this provides wrong solutions to the real problems. Amit may also be blamed for his ignorance of female psychology. He thinks that providing creature comforts is enough and hardly bothers for her emotional needs. He takes her out of four-walls very rarely and goes on admonishing her to create her own life.

Dimple realizes that women do have power, wielded in a devious way; because they are suppressed by their husbands, they revenge themselves on their sons and daughters. Dimple has more expectations from life because her father had made her feel special. Despite all the progressive ideas Dimple has, she is a role model of Indian married woman’s mind. Dimple is not a revolutionary character, but wants to be different from the regular housewife lifestyle. She willingly surrendered herself before him. She thought that the women of old believed that the greatest good luck for them was to die before their husband’s death.

The novel, *Wife* attempts to break the silence thrust on women and their position in society by the domineering males. It depicts the suppressed feelings, aspirations and anguish of women and also challenges the men to alter their attitude to give women their due rights and dignity. The heroine might try to be assertive or might sink in indifference. However, she admits there is

scope for growth and change. Through the character of Dimple, in the novel, *Wife*, Mukherjee has thus expressed the ambivalent attitude of contemporary educated women in India who can neither reconcile themselves to a new situation when their husbands ignore them and crush their ambition in life nor cast off their husbands simply because the husband is like a sheltering tree they cannot afford to live without. In a way, Dimple is a representative figure of the modern woman who resents her husband's callousness. The character of Dimple represents the modern woman ambivalent and becomes the victim of circumstances. She has undoubtedly gained the moral courage and necessary resourcefulness required to have such principle.

Dimple in *wife* symbolizes the predicament of a voice without articulation and without a vision. Such characters are visionless because they are voiceless; they are rootless because they are shootless. The basic flaw in Dimple is that she wanted to be loved by others but she does not love herself and the person who does not love oneself can never love anyone. She always expected freedom and happiness from others without making effort herself. The self-efficiency which comes from within oneself is lacking in Dimple. Mukherjee depicts a fixed American culture that negates individual identity in favor of communal identities located in foreign culture. In turn, it limits the liberty and success of its mythological promises.

Mukherjee suggests that Dimple's loss of sanity may be attributed to her sense of alienation from her own and American culture; she doesn't understand the latter, and neither seems to accommodate her. Dimple's sense of loss is heightened by her seduction by Amit's friend, a moral lapse that is as inimical to her status and self-identity as it is insidious to her role as a wife. Her sense of her own subservience reiterates her marginality, which is further compounded by her continuing frustration in adjusting to her new environment and new experiences. 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. The irony inherent in her displacement is made obvious in Mukherjee's transposition of the cultural context. In *Wife*, Mukherjee iterates the marginalization of woman by exploring—and exploding—ways in which culture and ideology construct feminine identity.

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