

## Cross-Cultural Confrontation in Bharati Mukherjee's Novel *Wife*

**G.Anne Nithiya**

Asst. Professor, Dept. of English, Nesamony Memorial Christian College, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli - 627 012, Tamilnadu, India

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### Abstract

In *Wife*, Mukherjee dramatises the opposition between two cultures, the despair of prejudice and the pre-consciousness of an immigrant. Mukherjee effectively portrays the progressive cracking up of an essentially neurotic sensibility. She exposes the dilemmas of immigrant men and women who are neither able to abandon their old perception of romance and sexuality nor master the American modes of romantic and sexual self-expression. In the United States, Dimple experiences both her own and borrowed cultures: the self-contained domestic world of Indians in Queens and the expansive and Americanized Indians in Manhattan. She is unable to validate her experience in the alien land. Unable to grapple with the conflict, she turns into a psychopath.

**KEYWORDS:** Conflict, Violence, Schizophrenia

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Diaspora literature deals with social ideas and experiences faced by the writers in a different society. The phenomenon of migration of Indian people to USA and other countries, their status there, their nostalgic feelings for their mother country and the cross-cultural crisis they experience in the new country are the major subjects dealt by Diaspora writers. Writers of the Diaspora are caught between the native as well as the migrated lands. Hence they behave like transitional beings, in the process of moving from one cultural scenario to another, responding ambivalently to dual cultures, attempting to integrate between the nation and the self. This paper attempts to bring out the cross-cultural conflict experienced by the immigrants.

Bharati Mukherjee's protagonists are the 'new' Americans who are neither nostalgic of their personal past nor afraid of the unfamiliar present. She sees them as immigrants who are confident enough to have 'the American experience'. Bharati Mukherjee presents their potential and vitality thus:

The New America I know and have been living in for the last seven years is a world, by definition, of doubles. . . . They have all shed past lives and languages, and have travelled half the world in every direction to come here and begin again. They are bursting with stories, too many to begin telling. They have lived through centuries of history in a single lifetime – village born, colonized, traditionally travel is a reality – I have seen it in my own life. Bionic men and women are living among us. (qtd. in Patil 28-29)

The entrants through America's half-open door of immigration laws juggle for a place in an unfamiliar though desired world. The strategies they adopt, resilience and willingness to shed the old and don the new, form the core of Mukherjee's novels.

In *Wife* Mukherjee writes about a woman who sets her "heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father was looking for engineers in the matrimonial ads" (*W* 3).

But later she has to marry a consultant engineer, Amit Kumar Basu. She wishes to migrate and finally migrates from Calcutta to New York with the hope that “Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund-raising dinners for noble charities” (3). Her American life in the beginning does not match the exotic American life of her dreams. She yearns for more pleasures and limitless freedom. She comes to realise that her life moves towards fulfillment only after her intimate relationship with Milt Glasser. In America Dimple feels excited as well as scared. She has never been to a city bigger than Calcutta and the magnificence of the city of New York terrifies her, “She had never seen such bigness before, the bigness was thrilling and a little scary as well.” (52). Her reaction is quite natural as she comes to America, naive and untrained.

The Sen apartment of Queens is all Indian inside. Dimple’s eyes notice a framed batik wall hanging which shows “King Ram and his court in splendid array” (53). Sens are very conscious of their cultural identity and they cherish their “little-India” in which their roots are deep. The Sens have nothing but disgust for the beef eaters and the English language. The Sens represent the feeling of insecurity in their host country. They are a class of people who live in an entirely different social milieu and cultural atmosphere who hardly shed off their cherished values for the ones they are forced to adopt out of necessity.

Dimple experiences culture shock when she goes to the market with Meena Sen and wishes to buy cheese cake. With fearful eyes, she looks at the pickles, salads, hanging salamis, pink roast beef, roast duck and turkey. She reaches the shop and asks for cheese cake and the shopkeeper starts staring at her. Everywhere there is the stench of blood and she finds the smell intolerable. She fails to understand the shopkeeper and repeats her sentence. He asks her whether she does not know the law and starts searching for something in his drawer. Dimple is so afraid and she thinks that the man is taking out his gun and she has no option but to be killed without crying. She realizes the difference between Calcutta and New York.

Dimple’s very first exposure to America leaves a traumatic effect on her mind. She fails to understand the reason why a man selling beef cannot sell cheese cakes. This is not what happens in India. “In Calcutta she’d buy from Muslims, Biharis, Christians, Nepalis. She was used to marry races; she’d never been a communalist” (60). She runs from there for life and even forgets to buy anything for herself. She is bewildered and confused and she questions herself whether she insulted the shopkeeper by asking for cheesecakes.

Dimple meets Indian-Americans at the party at Vinod Khanna’s place. She feels happy to see Indians after a long time. She feels as though a ‘little India’ had come alive. She is exhilarated India’ had come alive. She is exhilarated listening to the Sens, Mehras, Khannas and Bhattacharyas all talking in familiar language. Everyone in the party is full of praise for Indian things – culture, food, habit etc. These Indians are a contrast to those Dimple has in mind. She finds them disgusting.

Mukherjee in *Wife* presents two kinds of immigrants: the Indian Americans and the Americanised Indians. The Sens, Mehras, Khannas and Bhattacharyas are representatives of Indian Americans and Mullicks represent the Americanised Indians. The Indian Americans selfishly guard their Indianness, while the Americanised Indians care for their assimilation with the alien culture. Ina Mullick represents the Americanised

attitude by wearing pants and mascara and is more American than the Americans are. She smokes, drinks, flirts and goes to nightclubs. The Sens warn Amit against the evil influence of Ina on Dimple.

Dimple has confusion with the names of places like Nebraska and Nevada, Ohio and Iowa. America underscores Dimple's inferiority and she contemplates ways of ending her torturous existence. America has outwitted her and now 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?" (122). Her whole world is limited to the four walls of the apartment and media becomes her only friend.

Dimple feels uncomfortable with American English and the American system in general. She is afraid to operate the self-service elevators. She painfully realizes how easy it was to live, to communicate, to share with people in Calcutta after coming to America. She never felt frightened at the sight of policemen whose faces were so friendly, but the same has completely changed in the new environment. "Migrants use their intellectual, social, and political resources to construct identities that transcend physical and social boundaries, and they are . . . mere victims who are acted upon by the larger society" (Vijay 5). Dimple would have expected some trouble in the American set up when she came to New York because pain is part of any new beginning. But her experiences prove contrary to her expectations.

It is the American notion of freedom for women that makes Dimple question her own happiness and freedom. She even goes to the extent of seducing Milt in her own bedroom and hides it from her husband. Dimple's activities are purely an outcome of the culture clash she experiences. It is a tormenting experience for her playing two roles simultaneously – being the docile Indian wife and the free-spirited American individual. Dimple becomes schizophrenic and suffers from imaginary illnesses and develops insomnia. Though Dimple tries hard to assimilate into the alien culture, the Indian values lying dormant within her make her miserable. She feels guilty of the extra-marital relationship with Milt. Her emotions which need outlet often burst out and she suffers feats of madness, nightmares, reveries and insomnia. Mallikarjun Patil comments on it thus:

Life is really sad when it is lived without an aim, a character and a morale. This is what happens to those exiles of America due to the adverse American culture. Dimple, the heroine frequently wishes to die. Life does not hold her any promise. Like the Hardian hero, she waits in un-hope. This emptiness or nullity in her mind influenced by a barbaric culture leads her to her bad dreams and hightmares. There are frequent recurrences of her wishes to commit suicide too. (202)

Her deterioration is complete, when in an almost dream-like state, she kills her husband.

Mukherjee has effectively portrayed the breakdown of an Indian woman's psyche in America and also how the culture – shock turns her into a neurotic. It is rather the misguided Americanization that brings out the destruction of Dimple. She is trapped between two cultures and when her American dream fails her she aspires to a third imagined world. The violence within her explodes in the American environment.

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