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## Envisaging Identity and Imagining Home for Her/Self: A Feminist Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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### Abstract

Cultural schizophrenia, psychological imbalances and social crisis that a diasporic writer suffers due to the hyphenated identities motivates her to construct an imaginary homeland that would fill all the passion through an alternate reality. It is not necessary that such writers would liberate their characters in order to fill the vacuum. Indeed, leaving crisis on its own fate may be an alternate mode of portraying reality. The Indian-American writer Bharati Mukherjee in her novel *Wife* (1975) depicts the character of Dimple Dasgupta, may be her own image, to unearth that identity crisis which a woman always experiences either at home or in the world outside under the constant oppression and subjugation of patriarchy. Marriage, one of the powerful machineries to propagate patriarchal ideology in the Indian society subsumes the self of women and then represents her as other. The paper thus is an attempt to excavate those areas of patriarchal oppression which reduce women as mere commodities in the name of upholding cultural values. The psychological exigencies that the socially constructed woman suffers due to the predetermined sex role, is another area of study in the research work. It is also a critique of home in the context of female social identities.

**Keywords:** Culture, Psychology, Home, Identity, Diaspora

“We know what we are, but know not what we may be.”

(Shakespeare 350)

One exists as long as one has identity or identities. He or she disappears immediately from the memories once the self is dissociated from his or her self. The publication of the seminal works

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like *The Second Sex* (1949), *Sexual Politics* (1969), *A Literature of Their Own* (1974) and many others rejuvenate the feminist movement in the Western society during 1970s to claim equal identities for women in every way: social, political, economic, professional, personal, aesthetic and psychological. The pioneering slogan “To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man” by the French feminist writer Simon de Beauvoir becomes the igniting force for the women in the occidental world to fight for their equal rights that the political and social discourses constructed and propagated by patriarchy since ages always deny to give (Bressler 167). They fight for the “greater independence of each marital partner and greater equality in the marriage” (“Conflicts” 1654-55). But in the oriental societies, women instead of claiming equality still strive incessantly to liberate and emancipate themselves from the slavery of familial patriarchal oppression and brutalities of physical beatings. Women in India are treated merely as commodities with almost no thought of their own. Bharati Mukherjee (1940-2017), the lady who belongs to a traditional Bengali Hindu Brahman family of Calcutta is an Indian-American diasporic novelist and short story writer. She has migrated to the more progressive society of America after acquiring Bachelor and Masters Degree from India. Like every other writers from Diaspora, she suffers the same mental exigencies and hyphenated identities due to the collective memories of her past ‘home’ which she cannot forget even after the desired settlement in the new ‘home’. As a result, she takes serious pain to construct an ‘imaginary homeland’ in her fictional world. It is the distorted psychic enigma of her characters who voluntarily or involuntarily have migrated to the more captivating society of America which actually dawns the fictional world of the novelist. And this paves the way for the writer to unlock those deformed female hearts that lost their selves in the variegated experiences of multiple social milieus. Her novel *Wife* (1975) encapsulates the same fractured identity and cultural dilemma of its protagonist, Dimple Dasgupta/Basu who incessantly struggles to construct a homeland like her creator.

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 267), argues Simon de Beauvoir in her seminal essay *The second Sex* (1949). Children breathe first in this world with their biological identity. But these biological identities become gender identity once the society starts assigning different sex roles to each gender based on the principles of patriarchy. Dimple Dasgupta, the protagonist in the novel was born in the same middle-class family as the novelist herself. She is pursuing her B.A degree from the University. But, as a young romantic girl in her adolescent age she was always engaged in the “sexual fantasies” instead of her study because she is somehow being informed by the patriarchal machinery like her mother that the sole purpose of education for women is to get a better suitor for her (Mukherjee 13). She devotes much of her time to study glamorous magazines and matrimonial advertisements that would help her prepare herself for the “ideal boy” (14). Like every other girl who lives the life

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of obedience and compliance, Dimple under the patriarchal control of her mother starts controlling all her social and personal desires. It seems she has been performing her mother's belief that "pre-marital life is a dress rehearsal for actual living" (1). Beauvoir in the similar context further observes, "One is not born a genius, one becomes a genius; and the feminine situation has up to the present rendered this becoming practically impossible" (Beauvoir 133). Women like Dimple are never given chance to enrich their talents, to prove themselves in the intellectual fields. Her spirit of gaining knowledge is choked by the patriarchy in the nipple itself because the phallogocentric institution knows very well that if women learn more she will question more. As a result, the absolute authority of patriarchy on the social and economic discourses may come under threat, and even be collapsed. Hence, all Dimple has to do is to imagine a nest that her husband would build for her after marriage.

Marriage in Indian concept is a holy social institution that not only ties the knot of two unknown people, rather two different families suddenly become so intimately close to each other that it seems they know themselves for many generations. Indeed, it is not the marriage of the body, rather the marriage of mind, soul and families. Upholding the traditional practices, the concept of love marriage in Indian society is always looked down upon because in this system the role of the family and the society is somehow been disregarded. Therefore, it is the social marriage in which the elders in the family play dominant role which is the actual practice of the society. Dimple's father who himself is an engineer thus finds another engineer Amit Basu suppressing Dimple's dream of marrying a neurosurgeon. Immediately after her marriage, what she loses is her identity as she is now called Dimple Basu instead of Dimple Dasgupta, and then Nandini because her mother-in-law prefers to call her so. *Michigan Law Review* in its research work "Conflicts of Interest and the Changing Concept of Marriage: The Congressional Compromise" rightly observes in this context, "There is a long-standing custom that a woman will assume her husband's surname after marriage. Although this convention does not affect the woman's legal or financial status it stands as a symbol of the wife's lack of separate identity from her husband ..." (1650). The financial and legal status of the woman may not be affected in American society. But in Indian context the woman suffers the crisis on these grounds too.

The sexual politics played by the society by assigning prescribed roles to each sex determines the behavior of the girls and boys. And in this game of determining sexual roles, it is not only the social, political or economic institutions but also the family plays the most important role. As Kate Millet says in her book *Sexual Politics* (1969), "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family.... Meditating between the individual and the social structure, the family effects control and conformity where political and other authorities are insufficient" (Millet 33). It is not that Dimple completely fails to understand the sexual politics. But, she actually hopes against hope thinking that "marriage would free her, fill her with passion" (Mukherjee

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13). It will provide her identity, a shelter that she imagines all throughout her life. She endures everything both at her father as well as in her husband's house only with the thought, "Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love" (4).

"The curse which lies upon marriage is that too often the individuals are joined in their weakness rather than in their strength, each asking from the other instead of finding pleasure in giving", argues Beauvoir in another section of the book *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir 522). The husband Amit Basu wants her wife to be an ideal wife who would call his mother as her mother, his father as her father. It has become the duty of the wife to take care each and every member of her husband's family. Indeed, the husband's words are the oracle for the wife; his orders are the blessings for the bride. She endures all sorts of oppression and subjugation at her husband's family only because she still believes that the dynamic and much advanced society of America would fulfill all the promises that marriage has given her. Dimple could understand the compulsions of her husband in the family where the son has less space to articulate his opinion before the parents. However, she strongly believes that the husband's behavior would definitely change in the more democratic society of America where the husband would be as free as a bird. But strangely enough, things turned out to be worse as the husband who even after migrating to the much fascinating and energetic society of United States of America still wants his wife to behave like a purely Indian wife in American society. R.S. Krishnan notes:

Dimple, who had believed that she would be "free" to experience a life different and distanced from which that she had left behind in India, finds her existence in a nebulous, undefined social space that paradoxically, reinforces her indigenous cultural moorings: she is most reminded of her "Indian-ness" among the "Americanized Indians" (77).

The cultural schizophrenia, the mental conflict, the social alienation and existential crisis that one suffers being caught in the hybrid culture after deterritorialization and reterritorialization into two nations, makes a person's life really miserable and excruciating. Dimple already suffering that hyphenated identities being far away from her homeland has to strive hard to uphold herself as the ideal Bengali wife in the American society. She has to prove herself as the most obedient wife whose sole duty is to take care of husband. The traditional Hindu belief of *Patiparameswar* or the husband is the supreme god is as much effective there as it was in Indian society. The novelist becomes very critical of such development:

She felt that Amit was waiting for just the right answer, that it was upto 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

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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 drunken daughter. The Calcutta rumor mill operated as effectively from New York as it did from Park Street. (Mukherjee 78)

Charles E Bressler articulates in his book *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (2007), “Feminist literary criticism advocates equal rights for all women (indeed, all peoples) in all areas of life: socially, politically, professionally, personally, economically, aesthetically, and psychologically” (167). Amit ensures that Dimple should be dependent upon him on all these grounds, particularly socially, economically and psychologically. Hence, he does not let her wife to make friends with Ina, an American lady from India, because he fears Dimple would be Americanized and in turn would think independently like her. When Amit struggles hard to find a job in America, the wife intends to join a job offered by Vinod Khanna to support her husband. But, Amit does not allow her because Dimple might be economically independent in the process. Indeed, his dominating and subjugating mentality is vividly reflected in his life’s goal: “Husband should not permit their wives to wear pants. A healthy society and mutual respect are based on the clear distinction between the appearance and functions of the sexes” (Mukherjee 158). The observation in the book *Modern Literary Theory* (2011) can rightly be cited in the context that it is the “construction of public/private binary opposition which consigns women to the private realm of feeling, nurturance, intuition, domesticity and the body, in order to clarify a public realm of reason, efficiency and objectivity as masculine” (Rice and Waugh 144). Instead of having mutual respect for each other, providing space for one other, winning love by sacrificing one’s self for the other, the dominant husband is contracting the home for the wife. Beauvoir similarly observes, “The curse which lies upon marriage is that too often the individuals are joined in their weakness rather than in their strength, each asking from the other instead of finding pleasure in giving” (Beauvoir 522).

Shashi Deshpande once comments in her novel *If I Die Today* (2012) that marriage is like shut off of two unknown person in a glass jars who start their life with so many promises and full of expectations, but which gradually breaks down like a pluck of cards once they start distrusting one another. Dimple after so many years of constant sacrifices of all her desires finally realizes the deceiving nature of marriage. She endures everything, slaughters all of her fantasies, and ignores consciously the sexual politics only with the hope of getting an identity and a home after the marriage. But, now she bemoans: “Marriage had betrayed her, had not provided all the glittery things she had imagined, had not bought her cocktails under canopied skies and three A.M. drives to dingy restaurants where they sold divine kababs rolled in roti” (Mukherjee 101-102). She is not only dissatisfied with the institution of marriage, rather with her life too as she painfully sighs, “Life had held out such promises, but was so slow to deliver”

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(104). Now, life to her is nothing but a chancy business like marriage which promises many but fulfils none, not even an imaginary homeland.

Oppression breeds resistance. The constant oppression and subjugation gradually become intolerable to Dimple not only because of her dissatisfaction with the life, but also with the alienation of herself from the real world caused by her being confined inside the four walls of the house. The practice of subsuming herself as the subservient other can no more be effectively rehearsed as her trusts on Amit is withering more and more. "If she knew where they would be living, how much salary he expected, she could sit with her Better Homes and Gardens and better imagine a nest for herself", expresses the narrator (Mukherjee 97). But this "if" is never erased as she has to dream of it continuously, unable to translating it into reality. Amit thus gradually seems to Dimple quite inefficient and imaginary because the dominant patriarchal image that he once flamboyantly presented before her is no more protected as he struggles hard even to earn both ends meet. How can she trust a man or the relationship that fails to fulfill her reveries? The novelist expresses:

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 having bosom that would erupt indiscreetly through one of Dimple's offices, leaving her, Dimple Basu, splattered like a bug on the living room wall and rug. The cataclysm embarrassed her (156).

The upheaval in their life gradually mounts up and erupts with such a force that the whole chain of relational being is falling down like a pluck of cards. Feeling left out of his own cultural group, diffident about meeting people and passing most of her time in isolation, Dimple completely merges herself in the world of television. From television, Dimple "learned the details of American home life" (73). The impact of television is extended to such an extent that it is very difficult for her to separate herself from the crime serials of media life. Her lost self again finds expression when she unlocks her hurt heart before Amit in the park. And the silly, callous response of the husband is that 'why didn't you tell me you were unhappy' (180) so that he could explain that it is cultural shock which is common to every Indian wife. She is completely fed up with her life and now only recites her ten ways of suicide daily before going to bed. "All oppression creates a state of war" (Beauvoir, 717). In case of Dimple this war takes place within her soul. Disillusioned, disoriented and unable to grapple with the conflicts and filling completely overburdened with patriarchal oppression, Dimple stabs Amit seven times and thus discovers her/self. She now feels that the act of killing Amit is to deal with her own displacement. This daunting move also precipitates a sense of extravagance and of being Americanized within her, the aimless activity of a rootless marginalized housewife.

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“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 Vasu 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”, argues R.K. Dhawan in his book *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: A Critical Symposium* (81). He has defended Amit on the ground that Amit is not actually responsible for the gradual disillusionment of Dimple. It is Dimple herself, her sadomasochistic behavior, her neurotic disorder and her cultural schizophrenia which may be counted as the cause of the failure of the relationship. Indeed, Dimple once herself exhibits that neurotic tendency when she accidentally loses her child. But, the question is how can one forget the role of the patriarchal society in the construction of such “neurotic madness” of Dimple? Don’t they nurture the sexual fantasies of Dimple? Are they not responsible for Dimple to imagine such dreams? Is it not the responsibility of the husband to understand his wife? In conclusion it can be said that both Dimple and Amit are the victims of the institution of patriarchy which constructs their behavior from the birth itself.

The little twinkle wife has a soul to become Sita, the ideal Bengali Hindu wife, but Dimple has never become Kali who is courageous enough to grab her rights from others. Dimple strives to smile at everyone even at the cost of her own smile. But all smiles stop together as she is exploited to the utmost from her father to her husband, from her stereotypical mother to her mother-in-law, whom she loathes. She has devoted all her life in pleasing others with a wish for nothing great, but a tiny little nest for herself which will protect her/self. She is submissive, she is docile, and she is simple. And these mistakes of her are used by patriarchy to put her into ordeal in a new environment. Cultural rootlessness, societal displacement, moral bondage, patriarchal hegemony, and culturally inspired bifurcated desires take her identities from herself and construct her as other. Nothing wrong Dimple commits by desiring a home. Yet, she commits a grave ‘mistake’ that is she does not know how to get it from others like Bharati Mukherjee’s another eponymous protagonist Jasmine. She has never desired the Kantian self by becoming a girl with free choice; she desires a home and an identity from her most ‘loving’ person even by becoming completely submissive and dutiful to him, obeying his words as oracular. But the reward she gets is coercion, suppression and subjugation. And hence she is endlessly envisaging an identity and imagining a home for her/self.

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