

### ALIENATION AND PANGS OF EXILE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *WIFE*

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#### Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee presented a theme of cultural clash in the novel, and the extreme of the pain that is experienced by expatriates; she weaves the story poignantly around her protagonist Dimple, the story moves swiftly around her protagonist, struggle, efforts of assimilation, experiences of communalism, un-belongingness, swinging mode of her psyche, and at the end the drastic disintegration of Dimple, that culminates in the final act of Americanization, (from Dimple's perspective). The novel is the pictorial representation of the pain and trauma of expatriates, especially female expatriates, caught in between the nostalgia and frustration of realities. It explores the consequences of un-homeliness in alien land where expatriates spends their life as permanent alien residents.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Migration, Alienation, Exile, Home.

#### Introduction:

Bharati Mukherjee is better known as a writer who has completely imbibed the culture of alien land, rejecting her hyphenation. She is considered as an immigrant turned citizen who considers herself completely absorbed in the American culture. But in the phase of transition, she faced the trauma of being cultural outsider, and racial prejudices. During her settlement in The United States where she feels more culturally comfortable describes this movement in the introduction to the *Darkness* as "a movement away from aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration" (Mukherjee 3)

Instead of interpreting her Indian-ness as a disrupted entity she believes in celebration of her fluid identity. She does not trace her writing career amongst Indian writers she says her roots belong to North America, although she hails from India. She has made clear recognition about her American identity. In her essay "four- hundred- year-old woman" she says,

I am now an American. I am not an exile, not an expatriate, not a political or economic refugee. I am an immigrant. I have voluntarily settled in the U.S. with my husband and sons . . . Most importantly, I have made emotional social and political commitments to the country I have adopted. What can be more reasonable or more natural than . . . to write as an American writer on American and immigrant themes? (Mukherjee 47)

Although during her Americanization, she finds herself amidst chaos and confusion, of American way of living, because of the close, stratified and unassailable societies. Bharati Mukherjee focuses upon immigrants in America, and those immigrants like her have their

cultural values, have sense of reluctance while assimilation. In her fiction she weaves the stories about the entry of immigrants in American culture from various ethnic backgrounds; coupled with quasi autobiographical elements. Bharati Mukherjee in her projection of immigrants portrayed their fierce struggle and mental strength, as they try to assimilate in alien land in their everyday routine. She is meticulously committed to her central theme of immigration. Her fictions depicts changing attitude of immigrants from initial endorsement to later renunciation or in-between longings when they analyze both the cultures from immigrants view point, Indian immigrants find themselves in difficult position while adjusting in American culture but at the same time sadly aware that they can never embrace their native culture.

In her novel *Wife* Bharati Mukherjee's female protagonist Dimple Basu suffers from disillusionment in marriage and oscillates between two identities. In America she faces emotional isolation, loneliness and her ethnicity was redefined. In this novel the protagonist Dimple Basu remained emotionally isolated, unable to accommodate and connect with culture of alien land. She resides in apartment that was only a physical location of her where she finds herself geographically, her mental state was disrupted and distorted not at home but somewhere else, she is unable to articulate her desires and needs, she needs help but she was unable to convey it. Bharati Mukherjee beautifully maps down Dimple's psychological breakdown through various food images and dreams about physical violence.

She has also projected the racial prejudices of American society due to cultural differences, hostility towards Asian immigrants, constricting possibilities, for newly immigrated Indian woman in America. The *Wife* can also analyze from the aspect of domestic thriller. Bharati Mukherjee has analysed the psyche of Indian immigrants from different points most obvious is geographical re-location, their socio cultural orientation, language and its accent as a barrier in case of India wives, and composite outcome of all these negotiations. Immigration/expatriate writings are revitalized her in modern American fiction. In many of her fictions woman character she presented are unable to shed their external attachment with India and somewhere inside their psyche they carry a negative belief regarding new experiences of alien shore. The immigrants' strategic attempts, their reluctance and willingness form the core of Bharati Mukherjee's novels.

Dimple Basu in Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* represents the type of immigration that includes frustration, loneliness, alienation and psychological instability; she is not a strong headed woman. Change in geographical location can be viewed as a step towards freedom from strict in-laws, earlier she finds both marriage and emigration as an attempt towards freedom but when she reached America she was dejected after looking at the old ways of life followed by Indians even in America. Example to this was Meena sen who In spite of living in land of opportunities is carrying that old monotonous life routine and remained just a house wife in America. When Dimple Bsu starts living in her own rented flat she too leads a monotonous life of cooking, feeding, laundry, sleeping.

Geographical dislocation also did not bring any change in the attitude of her husband, about woman in new cultural space. Uncomfortable in new surrounding in assimilation process, unknowingly Dimple develops a psychosis which gets worse due to cold attitude of her husband. In her psyche she epitomizes America as a land of violence. She was misfit in both the roles, unable to condition herself in new cultural environment and as a wife. She was uncomfortable in dealing every aspect around America, in shopping, dealing with new gadgets; due to her

traditional upbringing she was reluctant wearing pants, Sticks to her old routine of cooking, watching TV but her consciousness was constantly haunted by past images, in her husband she finds repressive patriarch. According to him good Indian wives remain within the four walls of their home, by wearing western dresses they bring bad name to the family. Her existence within the four walls was an extreme form of cultural discrimination, her husband has put all the restrictions on her and she cannot participate in outside life, this leads to schizophrenia, the highest form of psychological disorder and in a fits of madness she kills her husband. Through Dimple's character Bharati Mukherjee has depicted consequences of non-absorption in foreign country. According To Salman Rushdie, "To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong , to confine ourselves to within narrowly defined cultural frontiers, would be, I believe, to go voluntarily into that form of internal exile which in South Africa is called as a 'homeland'" (Rushdie 19).

Migration is the central argument of Bharati Mukherjee fictions. Her personal experiences serves as rich source of her texts, she celebrates the transformation and reinvention of identities in successive "homes" at foreign land. She has her own definition of the word immigrant, and she has referred to herself as an immigrant. The imaginary homelands forms major part of Bharati Mukherjee's discourses, these psychological "homes" signify migrant's nostalgia and loyalty. Homeland becomes romantic when feeling of loneliness and mental disillusionment sets in.

Female immigrants are the victims of broken identity on large scale because of their multiple dislocations. Sometimes expatriate writing shows complete transformation of a woman, sometimes she is unable to cope up with given circumstances. In order to strike a balance between the two she lost that unique element that has separated her from rest of the people what makes her as what she is. Woman carries the burden of the values of her native land especially in case of immigrant wives; in order to maintain the integrity of an Indian wife it becomes very difficult for them to shed their Indian- ness. Female immigrants carry the caught between two cultures and this feeling of in- between-ness cause mental stress due to dual afflictions. Along with the pain of migration, she has the responsibility to assimilate in new community as per the desire of her husband.

While analyzing Bharati Mukherjee's wife the utmost importance is given to it as a expatriate fiction; psychological instability of woman due to cultural shock and as a feminist text. Dimple Basu's trouble have their origin in her immigrant's experience, as an expatriate she suffers from dilemma and confusion in her identity that leads to highest form of psychological disorder, schizophrenia, her mental instability started governing her psyche. Dimple's psychological demands and reactions are governed by her immigrant experiences, her life as an expatriate.

The opening of the novel reveals Dimple's fantasy about her prince charming and desire for marriage. Life will be all joyful and she will enjoy the supreme bliss. There is no place for struggle, adjustment and failure. Her prospective bridegroom Amit Basu an engineer failed to fulfill her desires and feed her fancy. Dimple unable to bear the pain of this dull marriage, desire to go to United States, as she had not even thought of spending all her life in dark and dingy apartment with sick mother in law. But the life in United States was not an easy one, all the freedom that she had imagined ended in dejection and depression; she became the victim of strange cold blooded attitude of her new geographical location. Due to work commitments Amit

had very less time for her, she passes her full day watching TV, all violence and murder stories, Dimple harbor grudges against her husband that he does not care for her, one day as Amit comes from his job she stabs him on his neck with kitchen knife, after this horried act she sits secure in the knowledge that in television murderers never get caught. This was the culmination of her Americanization.

This bare outline of the story reveals the psychological instability of an Indian wife caught in the dilemma of geographical displacement and emotional isolation. Being uprooted from home culture and adjusting in new surrounding take a lot of struggle, energy, passion and strong mind. Dimple is uprooted and it was extremely difficult for her to settle in the new surrounding

The American experience was full of boredom, distrust, and a strange kind of philosophical detachment along with racial prejudices that makes Dimple lost her confidence and trust in American land. In one such instance Dimple went for a shopping of grocery in nearby store the shopkeeper insulted her when she inquired him about cheese cake.

My law God's law, He presented a blood – smudged sign in a language she had never seen. “If I wanted to break God's law, I'd sell you cheesecake but you see that sign in the window, right under Schwartz? Look at it good, lady, and don't ever come into a shop like it and ask for cheesecake”. His face was red; a blood smudged card was shaking under her nose. The fat man was smiling, reached out to touch her shoulder, and she withdrew. Okay, okay. Little lady in the nice pretty clothes, get this straight. Nothing against you, nothing against your people, But you see the meat I sell means I can't sell milk, cheese, sour cream- nothing like that. Now you go across the street to the German. That nice German fella will sell you ton of cheesecake, said the fat man. Dimple ran from the store, eyes closed, hands covering her mouth and nostrils. (60)

She remembered the streets of Calcutta where she'd buy from Muslims, Biharis, Christians, Nepalis, “She was used to many races but never in her life time she was communalist, and so long she had money to spend no one would ask her what community she belonged to” (60)

She find herself in between cross- cultural encounters and imagined the streets of Calcutta markets, she was unable to understand American communalism, and because of the embarrassment over this incident she felt as if she is so close to getting killed on her third morning in America. Gradually she loses her sense of balance, sense of reality and succumbs to mental disorder. liminality is not essentially a nostalgia for past, and also it is not necessary it is a tension between lost past and current state of displacement and dislocation. It can also emerge inside your uncharted interior world, when you have split psyche. In the character of Dimple we find self effacing Indian wife horrified of being Americanized. She is aware of the disparity between two cultures and unable to accommodate herself in newly found culture, lack of love and quality time from her husband intensified her problems. And story provided no solution for her mental and psychological instability occurred as a consequences of her expatriation.

Dimple's problem lies in between her extreme tendency to fantasize and here in America she got so many reasons of approximation between two countries. She has two traits in her psyche a dependent woman, who wants to master and control on one hand and she harbors fear on the other hand a fear of losing her native cultural values manifests in the form of purity and chastity of Indian woman. Only love is panacea for dimple's problem and the conjugal bliss that makes marital life happy was absent from dimple's world. She wants Amit to love her back as

she takes care of everything about Amit, she wants Amit to love her back with equal reciprocation.

When it comes to transformation and cultural assimilation Indian wives who came as an immigrant uphold the responsibility of maintaining Indian culture. Even if they wish to assimilate in American values their cultural upbringing comes in between, that confusion between cultural values of native land and adopted land make them feel as if they belong to nowhere. Dimple also feels the same when Amit on her behalf rejected the offer of drink. “She doesn’t like alcoholic beverages. Amit said. “She doesn’t like even coke”. (78)

She felt that Amit wants her to uphold her Bengali culture without assimilating in American philosophy of life. And this should be her achievement that she did not let American culture affect her integrity when it comes to maintain a dignity of Indian wife. Irrespective of the fact that some where she desires to be like them free minded happy people without any burden to carry along with.

She felt that 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 feel stimulants to feel happy in my husband’s presence . . . my obligation is to my husband”. 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. (78).

Since Dimple loses her sense of security and more often she feels that she does not belong to anywhere, her real self pushed in the back ground, back home in Calcutta also she tried to see herself as a different individual, In the USA she wants glory and fame that never happened and thus she becomes a split personality, her mind was dissociated. In Dimple’s world marriage was a supreme happiness that she wants to feel it through Amit but due to job commitments Amit was unable to give that much of time, he has his own limitations and responsibilities and when the equal reciprocation did not happen she ends up in reacting vehemently. Her complaints were the consequences of her alienation; she cries weeps in the middle of the night. Her constant refrain is you hate me, you always wanted good looking, convent educated wife, and she blames him of neglecting her psychological and physical demands. Amit never realized the gravity of situation it was the trauma of agonized wife, who feels lonely, scared and neglected. For emotional and physical relief Dimple finds Milt but surrendering to Milt complicates her situation even more. She hates herself for deviating from the path of virtue; she has set certain standard for herself like a good Indian immigrant wife of following the path of truth and virtue. Again the cultural conflicts further complicate her problem to the extreme, unable to find immediate psychological relief she surrendered to neurosis.

When her psychological and physical needs were ignored continuously she herself developed theory of suicide and murder. Violent and murderous thought filled her psyche with intense desire to hurt herself or somebody else. Her actions are also deciphering her state of mind, still unnoticed by her husband.

Dimple was constantly losing hold on her identity, she even forgets Calcutta as her home, stops writing any letter to her mother, she only writes to pixie but in imagination never in reality, she was suffering from complexity of inner conflicts, sense of security deceived her. She inflicts self torture on her, once she sat for 6 hours in the park in freezing temperature. She feels herself incapable of communicating, she is tired of being trapped in the process of Americanization, and her anger manifests in the form of frustration.

Dimple lost her interest in going out, she loses herself in sleep and more sleep. Nineteen out of twenty four hours she is sleeping, this creates a rift between husband and wife, she has no desire for life, for living only thoughts of insomnia, nightmare violence as shown in TV haunts her. Her psyche wanders in between two worlds her inner self that gathered so much violence and her outer self where she had devoted to aversions for regular work. The instability of the inner psyche had powerful potential of destruction. It was getting more dangerous as it was hampering her thought process and feeling. She became cold towards any kind of response; Dimple's emotional life was suffocated and paralyzed. Disintegrating forces make a grip on Dimple's psyche and she was helplessly watching it. She reaches to the state of self alienation where she loses control over her, and contact with reality. Her mind was suffering from strong mental instability and torn by sad turmoil that was taking Dimple in its grip continuously; she was facing strong turmoil within and without. "Everything scared her: the spluttering of the radiators, the brown corduroy sofa with depressions- the needles in the rug, the ironing board . . . the cactus that had not flowered the way it was suppose to, and the smudgy wide windows behind the dining table" (156).

Dimple's disillusion is manifested through her dreams, she dreams of horrified things like violence all around, lizard, murders, she develops homicidal tendencies, her mind was full of violent and suicidal thoughts, always wanders in her imaginations with no control over herself and realities of the present, her mind was tired of longing which led to depression and that in turn diverted her mind towards violence an homicidal maniacs. In her deep hidden consciousness she desire for love but that was unavailable, she longs for warmth of homeland that too was unavailable, she longs for company of someone who satisfy her psychological needs but nobody cared for her. Enough of longing and belonging she had developed a permanent space of un-belongingness that has manifested inside her psyche in the form of acute depression and was disrupting her mental and psychological make out.

Dimple often dream that her,

Head was neatly sliced just below the chin, as base of the pretty table lamp... she was nothing more than an adumbration. In her after dream period, she sees that someone had murdered her and concealed her corpse... and Amit was recoiling from her. Amit is a "chimera" for her. She thinks of container for her husband's ashes were he to die a sudden death. She broods over the nine ways of dying. These, in her morbid imagination are setting fire to her sari, head in the oven, cutting the wrist with knife, starving, falling on bread knife (154).

Self destructive forces were already reached at its zenith inside Dimple's psyche and manifested it in the form of self hate, hatred towards almost everything. Her self-hate tendencies culminated at self destruction, it has almost torn Dimple's depth and integrity into pieces. Instead of suicide she reaches out for violence, the television became the epitome of madness, her distorted psyche insists her to murder Amit and hide his body in the freezer, and in the final fit of psychosis she killed him with the kitchen knife. "she sneaked up on him and chose a spot, her favorite spot just under the hairline, where the mole was getting larger and browner . . . she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times" (213)

Dimple Basu is the psychologically disable woman, complete novel she hovers in between her own un accommodating needs, Her character in the novel feels the trauma of un-belongingness within context of powerful psychological drives. Bharati Mukherjee used food as

a metaphor in deciphering Dimple's emotional alienation and cultural dislocation. She was haunted by loneliness and a destructive force that was gathering somewhere inside her psyche, she developed irregular eating habits. She lets spoil food gathers in the kitchen. Even her leftover makes her depressive and reminds her of failure in the process of assimilation or Americanization. "The stale curry smelled offensively of garlic. It made her feel trapped, isolated in a high rise full of Americans who ate hamburgers and pizzas. She thought she might have been a better person, a better wife at any rate, if she could have produced more glamorous leftovers" (119).

. She had expected the pain when she had come to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning, and in the sweet structures of that new life had allotted pain a special place. But she had not expected her mind to be strained like this, beyond endurance; she had not anticipated inertia, exhaustion, endless indecisiveness. if in those early days in Queens, the man selling cheesecake had not trapped her, she might have been free, even reckless, might at this very moment have been on her way by taxi to keep tryst with the glittering admen who proffered her tempting pain relievers and foot powder sprays on Marsha's TV set. She would not be in bed in a sunless room worrying her sick over footsteps in the hall and glass eyes in the keyholes. Instead she would be strong and sane. (115)

The American society has filled fear in Dimple's psyche, she only thought of violence, burglary, murder, and before stabbing Amit, at one incident out of fear she hurt Amit with a knife as she thought there might be some forced entry inside her house. Dimple always lives in some other world irrespective of what's going in the present time. She keeps on wandering in imaginations, past incidents, self weaved theories, fear. She was not eating properly, lost interest in all household chores. "But you never do dishes any way! So what?" this wouldn't happen if we had stayed in Calcutta," whispered Dimple. (132)

Dimple Basu being an Indian immigrant wife in exile state starts off her life in United States as an expatriate, true to Bharati Mukherjee's categorization she was soft headed woman, unable to bear cultural shocks of American society surrendered to it that culminates in emergence of the serious mental and psychological disorder. Initially migrating to United States brought a sense of freedom and liberty from her dark and dingy in laws household, she was extremely happy as she thought she is going to be free from the clutches of patriarchy. After reaching United States she expresses her wonder for every single thing that she had read or heard in India or have seen in the movies, it was like a dream coming true for Dimple. Even sugar she finds "beautiful very fine, very white, without stone chips or ants" (57). Her innocent enthusiasm to explore new culture met horrible end by her first attempt at shopping in Queens.

The shopkeeper abuses her badly for no reason that was her first encounter with American society full of communalism and hatred towards South Asians. Her encounter with racism left deep impact on her psyche and she started harboring fear for America in her mind and psyche. She has problem in interpretation of cultural codes, fear of violence, insomnia on one hand, Ina's American way of life on other hand and addition to this Amit's callous attitude towards her torn her psyche into so many pieces that she develops anger and hatred towards everyone.

Dimple suffered from the malady known as Schizophrenia the highest form of mental and psychological order, where only she can win, no matter if it is argument, her way of life, nobody is allowed to overpower her, nobody can scold her for any sense of irresponsibility. Her mind

and body had no harmony. M Rajeshwar in his article “The Inner World of Neurotic Characters of Indian Women Novelists” calls Dimple a sado- masochist. Jody Mason argues, Dimple’s mind is not an insane one; her body is not [. . .] uncontrollable, hysterical [. . .] murder is a choice for Dimple albeit a choice that is exercised in a limited oppressive space [. . .] her violence towards Amit is a bodily act but it cannot be read in isolation, Mukherjee insists that we also understand the mental process that preface this act (Mason 5).

The act of violence in which Dimple involved herself is the manifestation of her powerlessness and her inability to break the shackles of mental and psychological inability. She suffers from schizophrenia indulged in sado- masochistic acts in order to hide her weakness of overcoming of neurosis, According to Rajeshwar, Neurosis reminds of the fact that there is a seamy side of civilization. Society compels every individual to repress his instinct, and that way forgoes the chances of deriving pleasure in the act of living. If the individual happens to be weak and sensitive and intellectually too ill- quipped to openly defy such oppression, he finds an alternative in neurosis which is a form of both suffering and protest [. . .] all neurosis thus deal with intensely meaningful emotional experience (Rajeshwar 141)

Violence that leads to murder of the husband may be interpreted as an act that is committed when it was unable for her to bear the burden of neurosis, she took it as a medium of her freedom and liberty, schizophrenia made her psychologically handicapped, completely lacking harmony between body and mind, it gave her the vibes of drawing pleasure in sadistic acts, to come out as a conqueror only, nobody can overpower her, though we cannot justify the act of murder but it was the manifestation of her long subjugation, oppression, she finds it appropriate and commits it in-order to liberate herself from the shackles of patriarchy.

.The most painful line of the novel is “Women on television got away with murder” (213) as Dimple thought that what she did will lead her towards unlimited freedom and liberty, and she came out as a triumphant being whom Amit try to oppress but couldn’t win. Dimple plight and misery is heightened when she assumes that women on the TV always never caught by the police so she will also escape the judicial custody very easily, she was far away from reality, has complicated her miseries even further as she will now spend her whole life behind the bars.

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