



## Exploring the Spectrum of Self – Removal in Mukherjee's *Novel Wife*

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*Wife* is a blend of Mukherjee's attitudes towards India, Canada and USA. Calcutta is actually the initial setting of the novel, although at the time of writing she was in Canada. This paper tries to explore how this novel is partly a reflection of Mukherjee's difficulties to adapt to life in Canada, the country that considered South Asians as racially other and that its policy of the mosaic works to support ethnic differentiation. New York then becomes the epicenter of the novel although metonymically she being the author is writing about her own sense of insecurity in Toronto and her feeling of alienation in Canadian society. *Wife* (1975) unravels the story of an Indian wife, Dimple Dasgupta, who is married to an engineer, Amit Basu, and who migrates to US. Very soon afterwards, bewildered by the challenges of plunging herself into the new community, she is simultaneously pulled back by the past and burdened by the obligation of being an obedient woman. These binary circumstances are reflected in the moments of incoherence, disruption and splitting found in the novel. Keya Ganguly further stresses: "The women are thus positioned in thoroughly ambiguous ways. On the one hand, they have to reconcile themselves to diminished lives in which there are no outside supports or rewards for their efforts and activities; on the other, they are actively interested in the patriarchal ideology that the institutions of marriage and family are beyond reproach, and that any compromise is merited if it means keeping the domestic front secure" (1992:44). However, Dimple's integration to the host land is unsuccessful, as Anne Brewster asserts, *Wife* also articulates a bleak vision of an immigrant woman's failure to assimilate into Western culture (1993:2). Sushma Tandon adds that Dimple's problem of integrating herself with the host society does not lie outside her. She would remain a foreigner wherever she is to go. On the other hand, Alam argues that it is Amit Basu, her husband, who is the one major obstacle in Dimple's quest for identity. Although Dimple does not seem to be as confident and ambitious as Jasmine to adapt herself to the new environment, she should not be seen as a complete failure. Dimple has her own way of inserting herself into American society and liberating herself from Amit's patriarchal rules.

Even though Dimple's deed of killing Amit in the end of the novel cannot be

justified, the murder itself is Dimple's way to integrate and remove one major obstacle in Dimple's quest for identity. The murder is not the end of Dimple; it is, in fact, the beginning of Dimple's journey as a migrant woman. *Wife* is divided into three parts, modelled on the changing phases of Dimple's life. The first part of the novel traces Dimple's getting married to Amit Basu and learning to live in a joint family with Mrs. Basu, her mother-in-law. The second part of the novel marks Dimple's migration to the U.S. with her husband. In Queens they live in another joint family in the flat of Amit's friend, Jyoti Sen. In fact, Dimple and Amit never live independently from their friends, always having to rely on their help and hospitality. The third part of the novel describes their temporary moving to a sophisticated part of New York, Manhattan. They live in a luxurious apartment that belongs to Jyoti's friends, Prodosh and Marsha, who are away on sabbatical. In this apartment, they are freed from joint family life for a while. Significantly, Dimple's difficulties in adapting to the alien West apparently reflect Mukherjee's own experience of discrimination in Canada. As Sybil Steinberg states, Mukherjee's characters have always reflected her own circumstances and personal concerns, and one is able to trace her growth in self-confidence and her slowly developing identity as an American (1989:1). Dimple and Mukherjee, in this case, have something in common in terms of their migrant experience, though in the case of Mukherjee, she rejects the nostalgia (Brewster, 1993:3). In certain circumstances Dimple tries to adapt herself to an American lifestyle but her desire to retain her Indianness is somehow much stronger. Dimple's effort to retain her Indianness shows that she does not wish to give away her past, a part of her original identity. The past becomes an important element in her subjectivity. Fakrul Alam writes that, Mukherjee here focuses on an Indian wife who is willing to immerse herself in the life and the mores of urban America but who is also being pulled back, at least for the time being, by her Indianness (1996:83).

Dimple's migrant experience is the combination of expatriation and exile, the term that Mukherjee uses in 'Imagining Homeland'. Mukherjee defines expatriation as an effort to retain one's original culture which is followed by a conscious resistance to total inclusion in the new host society. The definition itself, however, cannot be applied wholly to Dimple's experience. Dimple, indeed, still sustains and preserves her Indianness, but she does not totally exclude herself from contact with America. Meanwhile, Mukherjee speaks about exile as the comparative luxury of self-removal which is replaced by harsh compulsion. The spectrum of choice is gravely narrowed. The ties of the exiles to their mother countries are still strong. In this case, there is a slight similarity between an expatriate and an exile which can be observed in Dimple. Both an exile and an expatriate keep maintaining their ties to the motherland, the past, by preserving the aspects of the past in the host land. Dimple's sense of connecting herself to the past is still strong. Rosemary Marangoly George also points out, exile, though very different from immigration, is the other instance in which one carries the baggage of the past along wherever one wanders. This chapter will elaborate on the importance of the past and show how the past influences Dimple's immigrant life.

First, it will discuss how Indian traditions such as arranged marriage, joint family, and wife's devotion towards the husband had shapen Dimple's migrant existence. Indeed, Dimple spends much of her time attempting to preserve tradition. Tradition represents the past or Indianness. The discussion will follow the sequence of locations in the novel to track down Dimple's development as a diaporic person for whom geography, culture, and

ethnicity are being replaced by configurations of power, community, space and time. Lastly, the chapter will examine how Indian traditions and the past combined with her present circumstances in North America shape Dimple's diasporic identity.

Hindu tradition has been a substantial force ruling each phase of an Indian woman's life. Ketu H. Katrak, the writer of *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World* asserts, Cultural traditions control a woman's entire life from early socialization as a daughter, to indoctrination into a wife (polygamy or nuclear family), mother, or if less fortunate, into widowhood. Dimple Dasgupta, a twenty-year-old Bengali woman who wants "a different kind of life and who has set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon" (3). She cannot resist the traditional roles that seem to be fated for her. Tradition in fact follows Dimple when she emigrates to the U.S. as she still has to deal with Hindu patriarchal values carried over to the host land. The Hindu patriarchal values come through in the demands of her husband, Amit, for example. Indeed, the novel seems to contradict Brah's statement that the reconfigurations of these genderist social relations will not be a matter of direct superimposition of patriarchal forms deriving from the country of emigration over those that obtain in the country to which immigration has occurred. Dimple's restricted situations are not changed by migration, the experience of being away from home. Three cultural practices can be identified which mostly affect Dimple's life: arranged marriage, joint family, and necessity of being a devoted wife and docile woman.

For example, as a Bengali girl, Dimple does not have the right to choose her own bridegroom, so cannot guarantee he will come from neurosurgeons and architects. The responsibility of choosing the appropriate bridegroom belongs to her father, Mr. Dasgupta, an electrical engineer in Calcutta Electric Supply Company, who is inclined to look for engineers in the matrimonial ads. J. P. Singh points out that, "the majority of marriages in India are still fixed or arranged by parents or elders on behalf of and with or without the consent of the boy or the girl involved" (143). Many girls are in fact not in a position to choose their partners, due to the restriction placed on free interaction between a boy and a girl in India. Thus they "have no chance of knowing a bit of each other's nature, temperament, sentiments, feelings, or aspirations" (Mitra, 1946:256).

This is not only restricted to one caste, and Nanda states that among the educated middle classes in modern, urban India, marriage is as much a concern of the families as it is of the individuals. Moreover, in *Wife*, Mr. Dasgupta's responsibility for finding his daughter an appropriate husband is clearly backed up by Mrs. Dasgupta, "Why are you worrying? 'Mrs Dasgupta often asked her daughter: Just wait and see; your father will find you an outstanding husband'" (4). Mukherjee herself seems to be disapproving of this practice, since in the novel she reveals that, in mid-January, when the weather had turned quite chilly and Dimple had to use a quilt in bed, Mr. Dasgupta announced that he had found his ideal boy. The cold, the quote marks and the stress on her suggest an ironical tone criticizing how an Indian daughter may not have her own autonomy to choose her bridegroom. Family control, has the purpose of ensuring the bride marries the chosen man from an equal caste and class, as Serena Nanda states: "[i]t is understood that matches would be arranged only within same caste and general social class, although some crossing of subcastes is permissible if the class positions of the bride's and groom's families are similar. Although the aim is meant to be positive, marriage often involves shifting authority from father to husband" (Katrak,

2006:166), ensuring that the daughter's lack of agency is transferred to the wife. Furthermore, Dimple's role as a wife to Amit is not only limited to serving him: she also must care for his mother, who is sick. Unfortunately, Mrs. Basu seems to be reluctant to get close to Dimple. Indeed, Dimple's effort to take care of Mrs. Basu is misunderstood as her way of taking over things in the house. Dimple faces her mother-in-law's frequent abuse: "Watch it! Mrs. Basu exclaimed. -You almost smothered me with that net! You want to kill me so you can get my gold bangles!"(25). Mrs. Basu's statement is a means of controlling her daughter-in-law but also reveals that she fears that her authority as the head of the house will be taken over by Dimple. Like wives and daughters-in-law, the mother-in-law too has a particular position within Hindu households. She has to be highly respected and served especially by her daughter-in-law; she dominates the arrangement of the household. Daughters-in-law are expected to devote her life fully to serve their mothers-in-law. This often creates disputes between mother-in-law and daughter-in law in an Indian extended family, since daughters-in-law are considered major disputants. Significantly, the domineering presence of Dimple's mother-in-law still echoes during her migrant's life in US. Tradition has truly configured Dimple's identity as a Bengali woman. Tradition determines not merely Dimple's life as a teenager and wife in Calcutta but also later as an Indian migrant woman in US. Tradition suppresses Dimple's diasporic life in the form of Amit's demand on Dimple to be a submissive wife.

Dimple in fact has decided that she will not change herself into an Indian-American woman like Ina Mullick. During Ina's visit to Meena's apartment, she tries to get close to Dimple and show her a leaflet of a woman in sari and bikini. Ina marks the changes of the woman as hers, that's me, she said, with a shallow laugh. Writing letters to her parents and friends in India is Dimple's other way to revisit the past and make connection with the homeland. Letters become her means to release her burden of alienation of the new world. The idea of writing a letter to her parents and friend in India initially comes to her mind when she realizes that migration has created an impossible homecoming and to Dimple, leaving Calcutta for good was still unreal. This has provided her with strength to adaptation. In fact, although Dimple finds that writing offers relief from her loneliness, Amit thinks that Dimple still cannot release herself from the past (Calcutta) by remarking to Dimple, "I guess your heart's still in Calcutta, ... You write too often to your parents" (7).

**References:**

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