

IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN BHARATI

MUKHERJEE'S NOVEL WIFE

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Wife, Mukherjee's second novel is a blend of the writer'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 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 (Koshy, 1994:75). New York then becomes the epicenter of the novel although metonymically she [the author] is writing about her own sense of insecurity in Toronto and her feeling of alienation in Canadian society (Alam, 1996:44). *Wife* 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 (Koshy, 1994:71). 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 (2004:45). 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 (1996:41). 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 (217). 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 (217). 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 (1996:174). 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 toward the husband shape 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 (Dahiya, 2007:33). Lastly, the chapter will examine how Indian traditions and the past combined with her present circumstances in North America shape Dimple's diasporic identity.

Dimple Basu, the Bengali Wife: 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 (162). 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 (1996:190). 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” (3). 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 –his 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.

Amit Basu, a consultant engineer is chosen as Dimple’s short, dark Prince Charming. Amit’s opportunity to emigrate to the U.S. was one of the considerations Dimple’s family took into account when selecting him as bridegroom. In this case, migrating to the U.S. is considered to be an opportunity to improve one’s life. Ganguly points out that “immigration has given them [migrant men] the opportunity to obtain financial security and also dignity, not merely –back home, [but] as well as secured him a better life there” (35). Therefore the wedding is welcomed by Dimple’s family and by her best friend, Pixie. Pixie comments: “What a lucky girl you are! You’ll be in America before you know it. I’ll still be slogging away at my typing and shorthand” (16). However, Dimple has different feelings. The thoughts of living in Africa or North America terrified her. She wanted to know how long they would stay, but she didn’t know quite how to ask it without revealing her fear. Ironically, although Mr. Dasgupta is satisfied with the marriage arrangements, the bridegroom’s mother and sister, Mrs. Basu and Mrs. Ghose, had made their point: ‘Dimple Dasgupta was not their first choice’.

Given that she strongly resents her inability to participate in the selection of her husband to be, the arranged marriage has negative consequences for Dimple. Dimple feels treated as property, her feelings totally ignored. Arranged marriage seems to treat the union of husband and wife not as a sacred moment but as a property exchange. It is shown in the

family's objecting to Dimple because her name is not Bengali and her skin is dark. Like an object that has a flaw, Dimple's dark skin is hastily covered with more whitening creams and homemade bleaching pastes, as Mr. Dasgupta tells his wife to camouflage Dimple's complexion. The parents are afraid that this flaw would prevent Dimple from getting a proper husband and the chance of migrating to the U.S., something which will elevate the status of the family as well. Mukherjee makes her view on the issue known by stressing the demands faced by Dimple: for example, since her mother-in-law, Mrs. Basu does not like her name, Dimple has to go by the name of Nandini', which Dimple finds strange, -old fashioned and unsung. In *Jasmine*, Jyoti, the female character seems to gladly accept the changing names and takes them as part of her significant self-metamorphosis. In contrast, Dimple is forced to take her new name.

Moreover, since the possibility of knowing the bridegroom is quite limited in an arranged marriage, Dimple avoids worrying Amit since she finds out that he seems to be restrictive and neglectful. She feels that: Amit would always be there beside her in his shiny, ill-fitting suits, acting as her conscience and common sense. It was sad, she thought, how marriage cut off glittering alternatives. If fate had assigned her not Amit but some other engineer, she might have been a very different kind of person.

Dimple also feels that Amit (as part of the agreement) has taken over all decision makings about their apartment, something which makes Dimple unhappy. She complains that the apartment is 'h-o-r-r-i-d' and -the water has to be carried up in buckets and stored since -- the tap in the bathroom is broken . Unable to get to know him before marriage, she finds out too late that Amit is a disappointment. In a further sign of the way Mukherjee views such relations, Amit also feels dissatisfied with Dimple; he says, "I always thought I'd marry a tall girl. You know the kind I mean, one meter sixty-one or sixty-two centimetres, tall and slim. Also convent-educated, fluent in English"(26). In other words, the novel highlights that in this kind of union both partners suffer. Dimple is especially discouraged, feeling that -there was nothing she could do about her height except stand straight and dress wisely. But what excuse could she offer him for her spoken English? "Although initially she thinks that marriage -would free her, fill her with passion, it left her -as someone going into [an] exile" (16). Tracing Dimple's story in the second and the third parts of the novel, marriage arguably leads her into exile. Emigrating to the U.S alienates her, and living in an extended familyitself

is another form of exile for Dimple. Dimple's status as a daughter-in-law in an extended family isolates her, since tradition determines that a daughter-in-law is an alien in the household. Nanda points out that "joint family is a common cultural practice in India, [p]articularly when the couple would be living in the joint family – that is with the boy's parents and his married brothers and their families, as well as with unmarried siblings which is [also] still very common even among the urban, upper-middle class in India". (2000:2). However, although the practice of joint-family living is taken for granted within an Indian household, this tradition, to some extent, also restricts a woman's capacity to have her own decision on managing the household and be independent. In *Jasmine*, the modern husband Prakash rejects the practice of joint family and decides to live separately from their big family. Mukherjee delicately confronts the aspects of the male characters, Prakash and Amit in *Jasmine* and *Wife*. The two husbands definitely have opposing characteristics: Prakash is an open-minded, modern, and encouraging husband. Amit, in contrast, is an old-fashioned, patriarchal and restrictive husband. Each husband has his own role in the wife's process of adaptation in the new land.

When Dimple and Amit get married, they move to a three-story building on Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road, a place where they live with Mrs. Basu and Pintu, her brother-in-law. Dimple does not feel comfortable joining Amit's family; rather she felt there were too many people in the apartment on Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road, too many people to make demands on her, driving her crazy. Aside from this emotional and psychological response, she does not like how things are arranged in her mother-in-law's house. She wants to arrange things as she wishes, according to her image of normal "young marrieds [who] were always going to decorators and selecting their' colors, especially their bedroom colors. That was supposed to be the best part of getting married: being free and expressing yourself" (20). Living together with her husband's family constrains Dimple, She thinks that she would like to be back of her 'own room in Rash Behari Avenue, on a bed cluttered with broken backed books'. But, as Mukherjee reveals from her own experience of living in an extended family during her own teenage years, "in the traditional Bengali Hindu family of [her] kind to want privacy was to be selfish. That was why [she] was so entranced by the idea of Iceland having little population and lots of space" (1992-3:153).

Extended family and joint-family have their own meanings in India. According to

J.P. Singh, “large stem/extended family is (a) a household head and spouse with married son(s)/daughter(s) and their spouses; and (b) household head without spouse but with at least two married son(s)/daughter(s) and their spouses” (2005:137). Meanwhile, joint-family is relatively defined as “(a) household head and spouse with married brother(s)/sister(s) and their spouses with or without other relation (s) including married relation (s); and (b) household without spouse but with at least two married brothers or sisters and their spouses with or without other relations” (*ibid*). In the case of Dimple in the first part of the novel, since she lives with her mother-in-law and brother-in-law, this form of family is categorized as an extended family. Moreover, as a Bengali wife, Dimple is expected to be an obedient and devoted woman to her husband and mother-in-law. Although the role of being a mother is important in Hindu tradition particularly for bearing and nurturing a male baby, the role of wife is even more important. As Susan S. Wadley states, the wifely role is pre-eminent in Hinduism, the maternal only secondary. Thus whereas mythology and law books provide endless models of the good wife-Sita, there are no prime examples of good mother. Sita, one of the goddesses in Hindu mythology represents the model of a devoted, submissive and faithful wife, as she exemplifies the behaviour of the proper Hindu wife, devotedly following her husband into exile for twelve years and Indian women are expected to emulate Sita. The story of Sita who accompanied her husband into exile may also represent the stories of many Indian migrant wives who, for the sake of improving their lives, migrate out of India. Dimple is one of them since in all her life she had been trained to please (*Wife*, 30). As her father says in the first match-making meeting, she –is so sweet and docile and ‘she will never give a moment’s headache’. As a husband, Amit expects Dimple, like Sita, to jump into fire if necessary, and to serve him. However, Mukherjee introduces the issue in order to critique it, and personally has long spoken out against the traditional idea of wifhood. In an interview with Francisco Collado Rodriguez (1995), Mukherjee asserts “as a woman writing in the 1990s and as a feminist born in India I had to reject the Sita model” (301). These views are rehearsed in Part One of the novel which comprises letters by editors and readers that debate the issue of marriage and the role of Sita as a wife model. Mukherjee’s rejection of tradition, particularly in the case of widow burning (*sati*) as a form of the wife’s devotion to her husband, is especially evident in this section.

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.

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