

Trials and tribulations of immigrants in Bharathi Mukherjee's Wife

Sumalatha, D.; Sasikanth, K. John Wesley

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sumalatha, D., & Sasikanth, K. J. W. (2015). Trials and tribulations of immigrants in Bharathi Mukherjee's Wife. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 55, 44-47. <https://doi.org/10.18052/www.scipress.com/ILSHS.55.44>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF IMMIGRANTS IN BHARATHI MUKHERJEE'S *WIFE*

K. JOHN WESLEY SASIKANTH¹, D. SUMALATHA²

¹Research Scholar, Presidency College, University of Madras, Chennai -600005

²Department of English, University College of Engineering & Technology Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjuna Nagar, India

E-mail address: wesleysasikanth@gmail.com

Keywords: Alienation, Cultural Conflict, Frustration, Family, Loneliness, Tradition

ABSTRACT. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most well known immigrant writers of America. Immigration is an amalgamated journey experience of oneself to another country. Migration separates one from their mother land towards an alien land, where it is marked by new culture and new adjustments. Bharathi Mukherjee's novel *wife* portrays an immigrant looking back to her mother country with pain and nostalgia. Bharathi Mukherjee had beautifully carved the shapes of the characters that even a normal reader feels the presence of their tribulations as the personal grievances. The present article focuses on the trials and tribulations experienced by the Indian woman migrating to alien lands after her marriage. Dimple, the female protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*, faces the problem of loss of culture and the quest for a new identity in the US.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee is an award-winning Indian-born American writer born on 27 July 1940 in Calcutta to Bengali Brahmins, Sudhir Mukherjee and Bina Mukherjee. Mukherjee's second novel, '*Wife*' depicts the mental breakdown of a weak-minded young woman who becomes a victim for western culture and undergoes a traumatic experience of immigration from the structured society of India to the liberated society of New York City.

In his "Reflections on Exile" (1984) Edward Said makes a distinction between voluntary and involuntary exile – between expatriates and refugees, for example – and the various political and socio-economic reasons for leaving the place of origin. Nevertheless, what he sees as common to these experiences is the painful loss of a native place, tradition and family (357-8), a loss which the exiled person feels when looking back to what s/he has left behind. Said describes "solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation" (359). Such experience of isolation in migration is depicted in Bharati Mukherjee's 1975 novel *Wife*. The immigrants in an alien lands are often recognized in great dismay, the loneliness of their condition. The uncertain hazards of new lands expose them to dangerous risks. The opening sentences of the novel present the protagonist and set the lively humorous tone:

"Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father was looking for engineers in the matrimonial ads." She fantasized about young men with moustaches, dressed in spotless white, peering into opened skulls. Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love." (Pg-3)

An accommodating young lady in her parental home, Dimple does not enlighten her parents concerning her craving to wed a neurosurgeon. Like a devoted little girl, she sits tight for them to locate a suitable match for her, and is always guaranteed by her mom that her dad would soon bring some person bravo. Dimple's fantasies are absolutely materialistic, and all she needs of life is the extravagances of consumer society.

Dimple worries that she was appalling, about her thin incline body and tries hard to whiten her composition with creams; build her bust by isometrics and completion of her Bachelor of Arts

degree. Anyhow, she comes up short in all the three things. She being raised in an upper white collar class moderate environment drives an ensured life. As raised in Indian Hindu traditional culture, she looks tentative, meek and easygoing in nature. Dimple's constant fight within the bonded and enchained middle class life aspires for want of freedom and love. Sometimes her depressed conditions hallucinated in her. "Sometimes when she entered the bathroom in the dark, the toilet seat twisted like a coiled snake". (Pg12) She feels that the aisle for 'freedom' is after marriage as imbibed in her psyche. She dreamt about being a good wife, docile wife conquering the husband enemy by withholding affection and other tactics of domestic passive resistance. (Pg-9). So she starts awaiting marriage with all her fantasies fed by magazines and films. "Marriage would bring her freedom ... Marriage would bring her love" (3).

Dimple gets hitched to a fellow of her dad's decision, Amit Kumar Basu, and specialist architect, waiting to leave to a foreign country. She is renamed as Nandhini as her mother-in-law felt odd of the name Dimple. She felt humiliated with her way of life as Dimple being taken away in her in laws. Nevertheless, she learned to be like Sita (dutiful and docile). Mukherjee quotes like "Marriage alone teaches the virtues of sacrifice, responsibility and patience." (27) The news of their going to U.S, brings a ray of hope to her sullen life. Her mind is now filled with aspirations of moving abroad and plans ahead about her beautiful life there. She felt ill when she had realized her pregnancy. "She did not want to carry any relics from her old life" (Pg-42)

Dimple doesn't want to take anything that is of her distressed life. Her dream for new life made her to pack and unpack things. Her new concept of freedom which was alluring to her senses was hindered when Amit's dominance enthralled on her. Amit wants her to interact with people but is apprehensive about her becoming too American. On her first day of shopping, Dimple had a bitter experience in a shop when she asked for cheesecake where she gets stinking beef. She felt nostalgia of her mother land. "In Calcutta she'd buy from Muslims, Biharis, Christians, Nepalis, she was used to many races; she'd never been a communalist. She was caught in the crossfire of an American Communalism she couldn't understand." (Pg-60)

Mukherjee's immigrant characters have a kind of self-excluding attitude, a desire to remain culturally and socially Indian in blood, isolated from American society even though financially supported income for better future from it. The immigrant group tries to maintain and impose a definite vulnerable cultural strangeness in an Indian woman i.e. they represent the combination of gender and ethnicity which is most prevalent among these settlers in foreign.

"Meena put her feet upon the coffee table and gave Dimple household hints: wash saris in the bathtub, throw them in the dryer, fold them in half and use spray starch. "But if the washing machine is in the basement of the building, let Amit do the laundry."

Dimple laughed at the suggestion. "I'm sure he wouldn't do the laundry! He hasn't washed a hanky in his life. I wouldn't let him."

"You want to get mugged? Women in this building – not me, touch wood – have been mugged in the basement. If you want to get killed and worse things, then go do the laundry yourself. Don't listen to me. I tell you these people are goondas [thugs]."

"But why would anyone want to mug me?"

"It's all the rare beef they eat. It makes them crazy." (Pg 70-71)

Meena's past experience, a replica stipulation of the literal dangers of assimilation, presents physical isolation with the stranger in alien land not only ensure a way of maintaining individual physical safety, but also as a collective norm to ensure cultural and religious purity as Indianess.

When Dimple was offered a job, Amit interferes and declines it. "One breadwinner in the family is quite enough," said Amit, looking for Dimple's agreement." (61) Being isolated in the alien country and without opportunity for exposure to outside world falls in disillusion and adversely affects her relationship with Amit. She is doomed to her world of fantasies hiding her yearnings from her husband. Lack of communication between the two stifles and chokes Dimple's voice and disintegrates her sensibility. She gets attracted towards Milt Glaser 'the exotic other',

who makes her feel good but she fails to decide anything as her twines are in her husband's hands who lets them loose according to his own ego. Naturally the husband becomes an adversary when he is not as per her fantasies. She symbolically struggles a lot for adaptation. Continuously forced to search an identity makes her feel insane when she is obliged to satisfying her husband or her herself.

“Life had been devoted only to pleasing others, not herself. Amit had no idea how close she had come to betraying him completely and not just paying the price for too much fear and loneliness.”(Pg-211)

Her insecurities due to indisposition of character take refuge into trouncing her real emotions from everyone. “She was much worse off than ever, more lonely, more cut off from Amit, from the Indians, left only with borrowed disguises. She felt like a shadow without feelings.”(200) Her dilemma is that whether she wants to become fully American or not, but at the same time find the life sickening there. The harsh reality of violence torn American society shatters her daydream world and so do her nerves. Dimple thoughts of being isolated, alienated, nostalgia, culture conflict and identity crisis become trapped in disillusion in life made her turn into a psychopath and finally she stabs Amit seven times thus setting herself free from the chained life of imprisonment. The problem between Dimple and her husband Amit Basu is one of communication, and an inability to come to terms with reality. Dimple's stab on Amit's mole seven times may be regarded as a kind of reenactment of the marriage ritual where the couple takes seven steps together. She seems to be symbolically destroying the marriage bond. The institution of marriage is apparently the most significant social issue that the two novelists focus in their work.

“When a woman is caught in the trap of marriage, she has only one way left, which is to languish in misery. Somehow she reveals an evident lack of trust in marriage and marital relationships. Every attempt the woman makes to redefine herself inevitably ends up in lack of communication leading to alienation (Bhatnagar, 160).

Dimple, though she is at times shocked at her own intensity of feeling and her capacity to hate, eventually she exercises her ungratified passion through violence alone. She cannot come to terms with either her own culture or American culture, and the emotional estrangement from her husband makes her predicament worse. “She wanted to dream of Amit but she knew she would not . . . he was merely the provider of small material comforts. In bitter moments she ranked husband, blender, colour TV, cassette, tape recorder, stereo, in their order of convenience” (Mukherjee 114). She suffers from terrible angst and it takes away the sanity of her mind. She has nightmares of violence, of suicide and of death. Thoughts of illusion and reality alternate in her psyche-the illusion of committing suicide and the reality of butchering her husband. The world of illusion fuses with the world of reality and she murders Amit in a fit of frenzy. Dimple's frenzied killing of her husband is the result of her notion that if circumstances do require such drastic act to win freedom, it may be resorted to.... The murder itself may be ambiguous in many ways, but it is symbolic of Dimple's assertion of power at a critical juncture. It has freed her from becoming a prisoner of ghetto, unbearable to her free-thinking mind, and she descends into depression, madness and murder (Tandon 57).

The point of suppressing feelings and how adversely it affects one's behaviour eventually resulting in “conflict” is corroborated by eminent psychologists, Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey in their book *Theories of Personality*: The denial does not mean that the feelings cease to exist; they will still influence his behavior in various ways even though they are not conscious. A conflict will, then, exist between the interjected and spurious conscious values and the genuine unconscious ones. (Hall and Lindzey 289)The self consciousness is an intricate part of Dimple's personality which proves to be self destructive as the decision to kill Amit is not a planned one but because of frenzied state of mind sometimes spontaneous. Thus unable to fulfill the perceptions and desires as well as the destruction of one's self identity gained power over the perspective thinking which happened for an immigrant in the foreign land.

2. CONCLUSION

After a close examination into Bharati Mukherjee's *Dimple* the readers feel that the immigrants are not comfortable in foreign countries. They need the support of their family members to adjust in a new place, failing their life becomes distress. Dimple who was leading a fantasy and aimless life chose the most brutal form to search for independence. Dimple faced the torments but her sustenance in the west is a million dollars question as she has to face the guilt throughout her life.

The novel *The Wife* brings out the sensitiveness hidden in Indian families. The distress women face for identification is presented through the protagonist. Be it East or West, women strive for their own independence, if it is not achieved we have to come across characters like Dimple. Unfortunately the great social reformers had thought of women and brought about many reforms but none could change the status of women in the male-dominated society. In most of the families we see women becoming the victims of male-dominated society or patriarchal societies. Though women are equal to men in all fields, be it education, business, space or technical field still her status is continued to be the same in the society. So the Indian feminists' writers are moving heaven and earth to keep the Indian women on cloud nine, free from all the stumbling blocks.

References

- [1] Mukherjee, Bharati: *Wife*, Published by Houghton Muffin, 1975
- [2] Said, Edward. "Reflections on Exile" (1984) in Russell Ferguson et al. (eds.) *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1990.
- [3] Vandana Singh, "*The Fictional World of Bharati Mukherjee*": Prestige books New Delhi
- [4] Dhawan, R, K. *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: A critical Symposium*. New Delhi: Emmanuel S. Nelson (ed.) *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993
- [5] Kalpana, R.J. *Feminism and Family*. New Delhi: Prestige Books. 2005
- [6] Prasad Amarnath, *Indian Women Writing in English: New Perspective..* New Delhi: Sarup & Sons. 2005.
- [7] Mukherjee, Bharati. *Wife*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975. Print.
- [8] Tandon, Sushma. *Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction: A Perspective*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2004. Print.