

**“Television and Magazine: A Diabolical Trap”-
A Psychological Analysis of an immigrant
Dimple in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife***

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The novel *Wife* which is taken for analysis presents the psychological portrait of a young Bengali woman Dimple, who experiences problems of adjustment to an alien culture and, in the process, undergoes traumatic changes – social, cultural, and psychological. The present paper also analyses how Television and Magazine is a diabolical trap for a woman like Dimple. Dimple catches the hint and begins to question the values of traditional Indian culture, which sets high ideals for women but treats them as marginal persons in society.

Bharati Mukherjee uses the third-person limited omniscience to tell the story from the wife’s point of view and, at the same time, to develop a counter perspective on the ideological gender role models for the reader. Dimple born into a middle-class Bengali family in which a girl of twenty is considered as past marriageable age, is worried about her marriage prospects because of her ‘dark skin’, ‘sitar-shaped body’ and ‘rudimentary breasts’. Nevertheless, haunted by erotic fantasies fed by film and beauty magazines, she entertains the vision of her marriage to a neurosurgeon as a portal to romance, freedom, love, and happiness. Her romantic vision collapses when her father arranges her match with Amit Basu, an engineer who is about to migrate to the United States.

The novel perceptively registers the culture shock experienced by Dimple as she starts her new life as an immigrant wife with her husband in Queens in the apartment of their expatriate Bengali friends, Jyoti and Meena Sen. Although she has broken away from her country, she cannot erase her ancestral past and years of moral conditioning about her expected gender role. In the company of her friends, she remains the docile and dutiful wife, ready ‘to uphold Bengali womanhood, marriage and male pride’. She obeys her husband by not drinking alcohol, by not accepting the job offered by Vinod Khanna, and by remaining in the background when it is appropriate to do so. She is elated at the social gatherings of Indians but her confinement to the Bengali community hinders the process of her acculturation to American life. In her ignorance, and out of sheer boredom, she turns to daytime television to gain an understanding of American life. This proves to be the most

disturbing factor in her life because slowly the American way of life creeps into her.

Dimple’s growing sense of alienation and her paranoid obsession with violence and suicidal fantasies as she moves into an apartment in Manhattan is heart rendering. Haunted by fear, homesickness, and loneliness, she sinks deeper and deeper into the world of television until she becomes culturally disoriented and loses all sense of values. It is in this state of mind that she falls for Milt Glasser, whom she regards as the personification of “America.” She finds Milt to be manly, warm, sympathetic, and uninhibited, in contrast to her husband, who is childish, cold, prudish, and unsupportive. With her cultural values and inhibitions gone, her repressed hostility towards Amit erupts in a climactic act of violence in the end: she stabs him to death with a kitchen knife. Her traditional upbringing makes her resist new habits like wearing pants which, as Ina Mullick, an Americanized female character in the novel, observes, would make her “look normal and anonymous” (W 155) in streets. Ina’s feminist friends frighten Dimple because of their inability to understand her; they come to represent a part of the American landscape that Dimple has come to fear through her mediated experience of American culture through the television and lifestyle magazines. Dimple sticks to her old routine of cooking, embroidering and watching TV. Her consciousness is constantly bombarded by the images of her past, and she discovers in her husband a repressive patriarch who would not let her understand the new reality.

What have gone into the making of her psyche are fantasies of affluence and plentitude which neutralize the actual reality of a middle-class existence. Dimple had wanted a different kind of life altogether. The craving for affluence is her psychic need and a direct consequence of her middle class background, while the other component of her obsession about the inadequacies of her figure and complexion is fed more by fantasies of advertisements. Her husband, though quite handsome, does not quite measure up to the standard of movie stars:

In those hours that he was away, any face in a magazine was fair game. She borrowed a forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips, eyes and chin from a body builder and shoulders ad, the stomach and legs from a trousers ad and put the ideal man herself in a restaurant on Park Street or by the side of a pool at a five star hotel. (W 24)

She has always created a world of fantasy for herself. These predictable motifs would have made Dimple an average hollow adolescent, “head piece

filled with straw of glossy advertisements” (W 13). But the trouble is deeper and becomes obvious by her erotic fantasies, shot through with violence. In her despair, Dimple took to reading ads in women’s magazines and buying skin whiteners (“Be the colour you were meant to be”) and an isometric exerciser (“In two weeks my figure developed 10cms.”). The girls in the ads were her friends. She wrote a letter on pink notepaper to someone she had never met. “DEAR MISS PROBLEM-WALLA, c/o EVE’S BEAUTYBASKET, BOMBAY-1: I am a young woman of twenty with wheatish complexion.” This evidently shows how much she is imaging a life as of the magazine models. The analogous obsession is happening in many of the Teenage girls in our modern India.

Life with Amit in the stifling atmosphere of a cramped flat, a ‘fortress’ of ‘genteel politeness’ – unnerves Dimple and she finds herself involuntarily breaking into dialogue with herself: “Happy people did not talk to themselves and happy people did not pretend that had not been talking to themselves. ‘Dimple Basu’, she repeated. ‘Dimple Basu’ is a happy woman” (W 21).

Motherhood to Dimple is an encumbrance. She begins to think of the baby as unfinished business. Indira Nityanandam says “in Dimple’s case, no such deeply thought out reasons impel to get rid of her baby. Instead it is her obsession with the idea of having everything ‘nice and new’ when she goes to the U.S. that makes her decide to get rid of the baby” (75). Dimple lives with her fermenting frustrations and puts her faith in the New World. She believes that now a whole horizon is going to open before her. Dimple from the beginning is portrayed as a person who loves to ape the West in all the ways. She did not want to carry any relics from her old life. She says in America if she is given a chance she could be a more exciting person, take evening classes perhaps, become a librarian. Dimple says “She had heard that many Indian wives in the States became librarians” (W 43).

It is through her addiction to American Television that Dimple’s crazy ideas are formed and through the Television and American Magazines she acquires her understanding of romantic American family life. Magazines, such as *Better Homes and Garden*, educate her in the romantic notions of American house-keeping “everything she saw on T.V. was about love, even murder and death with love gone awry. But all she read in the newspapers was about death, the scary, ugly kind of death, random and poorly timed. And she gave up trying to make friends with children” (W 73). Dimple feels confused as the T.V. insidiously

erodes an already warped sense of reality, and she finds much difficulty in distinguishing her husband from the men on T.V. Her friend Ina Mullick encourages her to take up various activities, but she is afraid to leave her apartment and begins sleeping all day and suffers from insomnia at night. She disapproves of the unbecoming candor and fast western ways of the other women, but is too Indian to complain of the increasing disorder of her inner life. Amit does not take such disorders seriously; in his mind only pampered American women have a ‘breakdown’. He explains that Dimple is going through a culture shock. The problems of adjustment that Dimple faces in the New World and cultural locations seem to stem from her inability to realize about the cultural identity.

For a woman of her cultural and social background, marriage can present itself as the opportunity to choose between two very different models. One is the very devoted and sacrificial Sita and the other model is the modern woman for whom marriage signifies young men in ‘five star hotels’. Dimple Basu desperately imagines herself and insists that she is a happy person: “happy people, gravitate...she could imitate them in her dreams, fake punches, tell indecent jokes, walk like a model, be incautious, extravagant, scandalous; no one would know” (W 189). What we think of ourselves depends on what we think others think of us. For example if we think others see us as clever we will think of ourselves in the same way. Cooley says it is like “a self – image based on how we think others see us” (quoted in John J. Macionis 123). Dimple always tends to create a self-image and tries to live in fantasy filled life.

However, Dimple, who has concealed her ‘guilt adventure’ from her husband Amit, devises a way of dealing with it, a way which would have made a mercenary killer blush: She would kill Amit and hide his body in the freezer. The extravagance of the scheme delighted her, made her feel very American somehow, almost like a character in a TV. Violence has become endemic with Dimple. Earlier too, when Dimple is instructed by Amit, in case he dies, to have his body cremated and ashes scattered over the Ganges, in a true Hindu tradition, she, instead of feeling upset by such talk, callously reflects on the kind of container to keep such ashes in, whether plastic bags or plastic boxes would be more suitable, and she wondered on ‘the bits of bone and organs that were charred but not totally consumed?’

To give her life a meaning and to save herself from self-hate, Dimple takes recourse to escape. In the Basu-home in Calcutta, she sits idle endlessly or

sleeps for long hours never getting involved in living. Her favorite pastime is to dream of America. Probably, that country would give her life a meaning and vouchsafe her identity. Even in the U.S.A. she feels unhappy and likes to escape – first with Ina Mullik, then with Milt Glasser and later in the world of fantasy of the world of television. However, the realities of life bog her down and a time comes when she wants to be free of the Sen household and be independent. She makes it obvious that she hates the Sens – Jyoti and Meena; she feels suffocated in their apartment and in fact she loathes everything associated with them, because of their too much Indianness in America.

Her T.V. watching becomes a diabolical trap, a torment without hope of either release or relief. Even the apartment objectifies the psychic decay and degeneration: “there were too many images of corrosion within the apartment” (W 127), probably signifying that something bad is going to happen. Her bodily reaction is expressed through her eating habits: “After the fifth spoonful she realized she was not hungry, was, on the contrary feeling ill and had spilled milk and cereal flakes on her clothes” (W 128). When Ina Mullick comes for comfort to Dimple for “her life was falling apart” Dimple also realizes: “Ina’s unhappiness was contagious” (W 134).

Shweta Rao and Rajyashree Khushu - Lahiri say “Dimple is an incipient feminist and lacks the mental and intellectual ability to fully comprehend the ideology and to implement it” (135). Bharati Mukherjee in an interview with Runar Vignisson says that,

The tendency for the conventional white feminists might be to see my character in the novel *Wife*, Dimple Dasgupta, as passive and I am saying that is a failure to understand a new kind of feminism in a new kind of America. To rebel maybe simply to withhold eating which is what Dimple does....

According to Mukherjee, Dimple learns to “ask herself ‘self-oriented questions. Am I happy? Am I unhappy?’” (quoted in Fakrul Alam 46). Consequently, this indicates her interest in the evolution of her identity and makes her a nebulous feminist. But because she lacks the capability to comprehend her own self and understand the larger aim of her life, she fails to evolve. Thus, she is caught between her desires and reality, between east and west, her imagined and real self. Dimple’s violent outbursts are symptomatic of the sudden changes in the locale and culture in immigrants’ lives. She craves for a whole new range of cuisine which could confirm her into the mainstream culture of America. The

American kitchen which seemed like a promising space with creative possibilities stifles her eventually and she is not able to extract the full potential of her kitchen as a restorative site because of her neurosis.

There are instances in the novel portraying the female protagonists are suffering from an acute sense of depression killer-mania complex and violent aggressive longings. Infact Dimple is one of Mukherjee’s challenging female creations. The ‘kitchen-knife’ used by Dimple is basically ‘a feminine weapon’ says Vandhana Singh (166). Dimple uses it to assert her superiority over phallic power. Dimple’s frenzied killing of her husband is the result of her notion that if circumstances do require such a drastic act to win freedom, it may be resorted to. For her “murder evolves into an acceptable signifier for discarding nostalgia and starting over : It is neither the end nor even merely the means to an end: it is a beginning” (Bose Brinda 53). Mukherjee says:

The kind of women who attract me, who intrigue me, are those who are adaptable, we’ve all been trained to please, trained to be adaptable as wives and that adaptability is working to the women’s advantage when we come over as immigrants. For an Indian woman to learn to drive, put on pants, cash cheques, is a big leap. They are exhilarated by those changes. With such exhilaration come fears, doubts, mistakes and violence, both psychological. (Connell *et al* 19)

More and more through Mukherjee’s novels, as the trepidation and doubts get over taken in the flurries of action and activity, what is glossed over in terms of psychological torment is compressed into desperate violent acts. This enhances the tension of the combative moments when decisions and choices are made, and Mukherjee considers it a necessary experience for the remaking of the self in terms of the new immigrant aesthetic. When asked “Do you see immigration as an experience of reincarnation?” Mukherjee has answered, “Absolutely! I have been murdered and reborn many times, until she needs to murder in order to be reborn.”(Connell *et al* 18)

The new births that are engendered by some violent fracturing of norms are accompanied by great pain, but Dimple is helplessly caught in the gripping quest for a new female American identity. She likes to lead a life of her own self. That she finds another way out of her miserably married strata is a comment on her new life as an immigrant woman in America, which moulds her personality into the shape of her future. There is a simultaneous fracturing and evolving of identity going on here, in terms of both ethnicity

and gender which are true of the experience of multiculturalism.

Tracing the evolution of Dimple's psychological journey one can observe a steady move from the 'feminine' to the 'female' in Dimple. This exercise concentrates on the psyche of the women characters extracting cue from Bharati Mukherjee's own statement that her stories were about transfiguration or psychic transformation and not about economic transformation. Mukherjee has adroitly utilized her experiences both in the East as well as in the West completed with personal encounters to observe and to describe the life of the women characters objectively. Shyam Asnani opines "Dimple is trapped in a dilemma of tension between American culture and the traditional constraints surrounding an Indian wife, between a feminist desire to be assertive and independent and the Indian need to be assertive and self-effacing" (42). Dimple's assertion of identity and protest against submission surfaces in the form of murdering her husband. She stabs Amit seven times in a bid to free herself from the matrimonial bondage, hoping that perhaps this gruesome deed would offer and strengthen steadiness to her splintered Self.

Bharati Mukherjee's delineation of Dimple's character is unique at the same time very uncompromising. It is difficult to fit Dimple into the category of females who try to obtain their autonomy through slightly negative but mainly healthy aggressive moves. The reader is stupefied at the ways in which Dimple carries out her plans to gain autonomy or freedom. As Mukherjee puts it "she seems to be striving to attain a new kind of feminism in a new America. There is no reason why we should have to appropriate – wholesale and intact – the white, upper-middle-class women's tools and rhetoric". Paul Brains comments that "the novel *Wife* has a brutal ending which shocked and repelled many Indian readers, although it evoked a strong positive response in a U.S. audience influenced by the burgeoning women's liberation movement of the 1970s as yet another depiction of the ways which women are channeled into restrictive roles" (113). Further Dimple's romantic ideas and happy longings for a fantastic life with all glamour, romance and play turn into nightmares, delusions and hallucinations only because she does not get what she expected from her husband. This sparks off and tones up the psychosis in her, turning her to the kitchen and the TV and slothful habits which in the end culminate in murder which does not incriminate her because it is fair on the TV and she can get away scot free. Dimple's choice simply transfers to another equally confining subject position: imitation of the

materialistic women portrayed on American Television.

Mukherjee states:

When I'm writing I'm not conscious of anything other than getting in the skin and into the skill of my character but when I'm finished with a draft and look at it to realize that very often it's about mother-daughter relations and about the formation of a very strong woman. And that strength may sometimes express itself in negative and violent ways but I still think of all my characters as women who've asserted themselves according to their own improvised moral code even if they murder or hurt other men who've hurt them earlier, the hurt that they inflict comes out of their own very precise sense of Right and Wrong. (BBC- Her Story)

Bharati Mukherjee has tried to assemble all types of temperaments in her work where she has worked out the mental and physical interactions of the female mind. The complexities of human feelings have been projected through her characters. The "existence in dualism," of wanting to be something and still not wholly committed to it, leads a person to the same consequence as Dimple in *Wife*.

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