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VITAL INDIANNESS IN DIASPORIC TRIAL, NEUROSIS AND THE TRANSIT OF CULTURE:
A STUDY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S "WIFE" .

Dr. RAJIB BHAUMIK

Assistant Professor

Dept of English, Alipurduar College



Dr. RAJIB BHAUMIK

ABSTRACT

Dimple, the woman protagonist in *Wife*, stands at the transit point of culture, confused between her Indianness and the transplantation; she is skeptical about traditional values and vapid social norms but she is unable to negotiate the need of the crude transnational norms which demand both exclusion and merger. Her inability to deal with the pangs of displacement results in violence, both psychic and physical. In India, unhappy wives commit suicide; Dimple asserts herself by committing murder, not suicide. There are mutative stages in the continuing evolution of Bharati Mukherjee as a writer which includes dislocation, violence and neurosis. The changes which occurred were due to vital inputs from the fast changing global climate. No doubt, that we encounter an entirely changed writer in *Darkness* but this dynamics of growth is present in *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*.

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There are mutative stages in the continuing evolution of Bharati Mukherjee as a writer. The changes which occurred were due to vital inputs from the fast changing global climate. No doubt, that we encounter an entirely changed writer in *Darkness* but this dynamics of growth is present in *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* also. In both these novels the author's voice is omniscient. However, they are not written to imply, as Jasbir Jain says, 'total rejection or a ruthless questioning of tradition or a love-hate relationship with the native heritage.'ⁱ Rather, these early novels depict the psychic journey of the migratory self shared by many other Indians studying, living and working for long periods abroad in Europe or the United States.

Given Mukherjee's moral and metaphysical inclinations, it is all the more surprising that she should see herself as an immigrant American rather than an expatriate Indian. 'Language gives me my identity,' tells Mukherjee, 'I am the writer, I am because I write in North American English about immigrant in the new World.'ⁱⁱ Bhabha leaves a question to ponder over very seriously:

To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow [...] The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused;

and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.ⁱⁱⁱ

Mukherjee deals with the “unhomely” as a ‘paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition.’^{iv} This is a necessity and has a “resonance”^v far and wide. In her fictions the novelist seeks to negotiate the forces of ‘cultural difference in a range of transhistorical’^{vi} locations where the displaced have their own discourse and counter-narrative of survival. According to Mukherjee, there are two kinds of writers — those who confirm what the public wants to know, and the other kind who disturbs, interrogates the existing patterns. She clearly sees herself as belonging to the second variety. She tells Vrinda Nabar:

Such writers are often misread. I sometimes think I’ve been too smart for my own good. I see a writer as always being in a minority of one, stating what is unsettling and disturbing. Knowledge and empathy have nothing to do with inherited race. A writer’s identity is not exclusively biological: it is about the imagination claiming its territory and finding its own niche there.^{vii}

Indian critics have invariably viewed Mukherjee’s non-native concerns unfavorably. She explained her position to Jerry Pinto:

I think my position has been misunderstood largely in India. I insist on being considered an American writer because I want America to realize that in the late 20th Century there can be no American centre and periphery [...] I am fighting the American establishment to be regarded as central. I want to destroy the whole notion that Asians, or people of a different colour are ‘sojourners’ whereas those who arrived in America from Germany or Sweden are ‘settlers.’ It’s also a way of resisting exoticisation.^{viii}

Bharati Mukherjee at an early stage of life came to encounter the various facets of life of Indian society where a bride commits suicide due to noncompliance of dowry demands. Atrocities inflicted on women moulded her bent of mind: ‘To be a woman, I had learned early enough, was to be powerless victim whose only escape was through self-inflicted wounds.’^{ix} The constant hunger-strikes, violent labour disputes made life pathetic. The helplessness led to irascibility, which she encountered all around her:

My year in India had showed me that I did not need to discard Western education in order to retrieve the dim shape of my Indian one. It might have been less painful if I could have exchanged one locked trunk of ethics for another, but I had to admit that by the end of the year in India I no longer liked India in the unreal and exaggerated ways I had in Montreal.^x

The illusion and mental construction of India began to wane bit by bit. The clumsy withdrawal of the mirage about Indianness made Mukherjee to resolve not to become a split personality. She doesn’t have any native pool or prick of conscience in her assessment about her altered identity. India has thus become an ‘other’ and just one ‘Asian country with too many agonies’^{xi} to remember. She has built along with Clark their homeland ‘out of expectation, not memory.’^{xii} She says, ‘As I prepare to leave Bombay for the slow flight westward, I realized that for me there would be no more easy consolation through India.’^{xiii} In this context, however, Mukherjee’s attitude whether escapist or defeatist is subject to debate and further analysis in terms her texts. She says- ‘It was hard to give up my faintly Chekhovian image of India. But if that was about to disappear, could I not invent a more exciting perhaps a more psychologically accurate a more precisely metaphoric India: many more Indias?’^{xiv}

. In *Wife* Mukherjee also has incorporated her own frustration as an Indian settler in Canada before assimilating into the American mainstream. Even though the setting of *Wife* is New York, in the mind of the author it is probably Toronto. In Dimple, Holzer says: ‘Mukherjee articulates an instructive admonition about

the relevance of psychological transformation, beyond the immigrant isolationist's struggle for survival, through adaptation to new surroundings and to the ways of the dominant American culture.^{xv}

Dimple, the woman protagonist in *Wife*, stands at the transit point of culture, confused between her Indianness and the transplantation; she is skeptical about traditional values and vapid social norms but she is unable to negotiate the need of the crude transnational norms which demand both exclusion and merger. Her inability to deal with the pangs of displacement results in violence, both psychic and physical. In India, unhappy wives commit suicide; Dimple asserts herself by committing murder, not suicide.

Like any other woman in the Indian context, Dimple experiences the agony and anxiety of a long wait for the most suitable boy. The wasted years, 'lay like a chill weight in her body, giving her eyes a watchful squint and her spine a slight curve.'^{xvi} She worries about her 'sitar shaped body and rudimentary breasts.'^{xvii} She tries all sorts of therapies only to end up in the hospital with chest pain. Dimple's excessive concern about her personal appearance is understandable because this counts in the matrimonial transaction. Dimple is in great anguish. She writes to Problemwalla c/o Eves Beauty Basket, Bombay, about her flat chest.

I am a young woman of twenty with whitish complexion. In addition, I am well versed in Rabindra singing, free-style dancing to Tagore's music, sitar playing, knitting and fancy cooking. I weight 48 kilos and am considered slim. My hair is jet black, hip-length and agreeably wavy. [...] There is just one annoying flea in my ointment. The flea is my flat chest. As I am sure you realize, this defect will adversely affect my chances of securing an ideal husband and will sorely vex the prowess of even the shrewdest match-makers in this great nation. Therefore, I'm sure you will agree it's imperative that I do something about my problem and enhance my figure to the best of my ability. Please do not, I beg you, advocate chicken soup, homeopathic pills, exercise and massages. I have tried them already. [...] Need I say that I am desperate, almost suicidal? I see life slamming its door in my face. I want to live!^{xviii}

This explains the desperate condition of Dimple and more so the pressures of the society on a young woman waiting to get married.

At last Mr. Dasgupta finds a suitable match for Dimple. Amit Basu, a Consultant Engineer, is the match for Dimple. He has already applied for immigration to Canada and U.S. and his job application is also pending in Kenya. Dimple is all ecstatic about her marriage and does a lot of shopping for the occasion. She comes to Amit's residence at Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road after her marriage. Basus are good people but the house is not that spacious and attractive. From the very beginning Dimple does not feel easy there. She does not like Amit's mother and sister. Her mother-in-law dislikes her name 'Dimple' and wants to call her 'Nandini' instead which simply infuriates the bride. However, Dimple thinks that all these problems are temporary and with the confirmation for immigration they will eventually come to an end. She frequently talks with her husband about the anticipated and fantastic foreign trip though 'Thoughts of living in Africa or North America terrified her.'^{xix}

Dimple Basu has always lived in a fantastic world, a world which is created by herself. But when she confronts the hard realities of life the feathers of her imagination are clipped. All her dreams crumble one by one and she is deeply upset. She thinks that waiting for marriage was better than getting married. She starts hating everything: 'She hated the gray cotton with red roses inside yellow circle that her mother-in-law had hung on sagging tapes against the metal bars of the window.'^{xx}

Pregnancy is a boon for Indian women because they are supposed to maintain the continuity of the clan. They are the very source of creation. If a woman fails to reproduce a child she is condemned and becomes an object of hatred in society. But Dimple is singular in that 'she thought of ways to get rid of ... whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes.'^{xxi} Her killing of the mice which looked pregnant also suggests that she does not feel at ease with her pregnancy. She becomes almost hysteric in killing that tiny creature without any particular reason:

She pounded and pounded the baby clothes until a tiny gray creature ran out of the pile, leaving a faint trickle of blood on the linen. She chased it to the bathroom. She shut the door so it would not

escape from her this time [...] 'I'll get you' she screamed. "There is no way out of this, my friend!" [...] And in an outburst of hatred, 'her body shuddering, her wrist taut with fury, she smashed the top of a small gray head.'^{xxii}

This act of killing is a manifestation of violence that is brewing inside her. Her repulsion with her own pregnancy is born out of her hatred for Amit who fails to feed her fantasy world. She develops morbid desires like noticing angry faces of men by purposely dropping on them bits of newspaper, hair balls, nail clippings, etc. Dimple who had shuddered at the pain of the crows shot by Amit, gives a hot chase to a rat and smashes the top of the small grey head with her 'body shuddering, her wrist taut with fury.'^{xxiii} These incidents reveal the streak of violence developing in her personality. By mid May, Dimple misses a period but she continues to eat green chilies so that her body will return to its natural cycle. She likes to vomit but not pregnancy. When no one is watching, she gives vicious squeezes to her stomach. She considers pregnancy as an invasion of her body. She starts falling apart. She seeks exile from her essential femininity.

She thinks that no one has consulted her before depositing the foetus in her body. Finally, in a crude way she skips her way to abortion. This is another way of giving vent to her hatred of the Basus, possibly because the Basus look upon the unborn baby as communal property and are very solicitous of her health. For his part, Amit thinks that the unborn boy will become a doctor and mint money. In this context, Dimple's killing the mouse is a symbolic act. It symbolises her hatred towards Amit and also her own pregnant self. The entire scene looks macabre:

But today she hated the invisible mice for disrupting her day-dreams – she could not dare borrow features from a rodent! — and she pushed aside the platter of rice, listening for soft scratchy sounds so that she could smash life out of the little gray heads. When the noises came again, this time from behind the peeling wooden doors leading to the bedroom, she stood up nervously and grabbed a broom as a weapon. In her hurry to snatch the broom, she stepped on the stainless steel platter of rice grains. The little toe on her left foot began to bleed. There was a tiny drop of blood, her blood she thought, astonished, on the coarse, reddish white grains of rice. It was an added reason for killing the mouse.^{xxiv}

The entire scene indicates her hatred towards pregnancy which is a violation of her normal self. She looks at the unborn fetus as a part of Amit. The connection between Dimple and the mouse is that both are pregnant and before migrating to America she does 'not want to carry any relics from her old life.'^{xxv} She thinks that old things will remind her of her repressive femininity frustrations and irritations. She counts her pregnancy also among the relics of exasperating tradition and contemplates the ways of getting rid of it. At last she decides to end it by skipping ropes.

She had skipped rope until her legs grew numb and her stomach burned; then she had poured water from the heavy bucket over her head, shoulders, over the tight little curve of her stomach. She had poured until the last of the blood washed off her legs; then she had collapsed.^{xxvi}

With the passage of time, Dimple starts getting dislocated after the realisation that she is deceived in marriage and a good-for-nothing husband like Amit will not cater for her dream-world. She cannot tolerate his snores anymore and insomnia becomes her accustomed habit. She suddenly realizes that 'she hated the Sens' apartment, sofa-bed, the wall to wall rug.'^{xxvii} Now she gets disturbed at those habits of Amit which she ignored at Calcutta:

In Calcutta she had trained herself not to see his hand (always the left) as it stopped carefully at each button, then slid up and down a few times before hanging limply at his side. But in New York these little gestures had begun to irritate her.^{xxviii}

Amit's unemployment was the root cause of all troubles. He was not the man Dimple had wanted as husband: 'She wanted Amit to be infallible, intractable, godlike, but with the boyish charm; wanted him to find a job so that after a decent number of years he could take his savings and retire with her to a three-storey house in Ballygunge Park.'^{xxix} She thinks that her marriage to Amit is a failure of her dreams:

She was bitter that marriage had betrayed her, had not provided all the glittery things she had imagined, had not brought her cocktails under canopied skies and three A.M. drives to dingy restaurants where they sold divine Kababs rolled in roti.^{xxx}

She loses her sleep and ultimately kills Amit without actually thinking about its consequences:

She sneaked up on him and chose a spot, her favourite spot just under the hairline, where the mole was getting larger and browner, and she drew an imaginary line of kisses because she did not want him to think she was the impulsive, foolish sort who acted like a maniac just because the husband was suffering from insomnia. She touched the mole very lightly and let her fingers draw a circle around the detectable spot, then she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times, each time a little harder, until the milk in the bowl of cereal was a pretty pink and the flakes were mushy and would have embarrassed any advertiser, and then she saw the head fall off — but of course it was her imagination because she was not sure any more what she had seen on TV and what she had seen in the private screen of three A.M. — and it stayed upright on the counter-top, still with its eyes averted from her face, and she said very loudly to the knife that was redder now than it had ever been when she had chopped chicken and mutton with it in the same kitchen and on the same counter [...] Women on television got away with murder.^{xxxi}

The above description shows that it is a case of cold blooded murder. By stabbing seven times, it seems Dimple frees herself from the marriage tie. This is the only act of assertion she can make. It may not be very appropriate to view that Dimple's gruesome act has nothing to do with cultural displacement. She is trapped in the transit of culture and her vital Indianness is put to diasporic trial. She is not a victim of 'expatriation' alone, but is instead, a victim of her own neurotic sensibility fed on popular advertisement fantasies.

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