

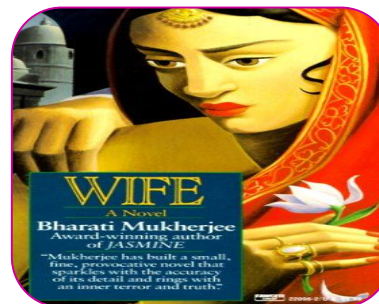


CULTURAL CRISIS IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S WIFE

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural crisis has gained momentum since the beginning of the twentieth century. Globalization has increased multi-culturalism. Many novelists have touched the theme of cultural crisis. Many novelists bring out the effect of the culture in their works. In Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock, Bye-Bye, Blackbird* the protagonist faces problems to tackle the expectations of the society. In the works of Bharati Mukherjee, there is cross culture shock and at the end the characters search for their identity. His *Wife* is the story of a middle-classed Bengali girl, Dimple who is married to Amit, an engineer. After their wedding, they go to America. In America, she understands that life is not as glamorous as she has imagined it to be. Cultural shock, alienation, media violence and her husband's long stays at office complicate her mind. It makes her neurotic and she kills her husband. So, to overcome cultural crisis one should retain one's culture as far as possible even while living on an alien soil.

INTRODUCTION:

The women living in the twentieth and twenty-first century face an unprecedented cultural crisis. This has led to a lot of problems on striving to fulfill their responsibilities. In post-colonial societies, the cultural crisis seems to dominate other considerations. This has been demonstrated by many novelists in their novels. Bharati Mukherjee portrays the Indian women who have faced a cross-cultural crisis which lead them to search for an identity. The cultural clash is between the east and the west. The female protagonist tries to tackle the problem of loss of culture and search for an identity. A person must leave their own culture and enter another culture. The original culture and its values comes into conflict with the new one. This cultural transplant leads to an identity crisis. This paper aims to shed light on the cultural conflict of women with reference to Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*.

Bharati Mukherjee explores through *Wife* the meaning of life. Being an emigrant herself, a lot of colour and personal flavour makes her works distinct. Cross cultural crisis leads ultimately for an individual to search for an identity. She reflects the temperament and mood of the present American society as experienced by Indian immigrants in America. Bharati Mukherjee has shown a dual cultural shock in *Wife*. Dimple leaves the country and goes to USA. This migration leads to a cultural crisis and a final reconciliation. She has presented a study of the problem of a displaced person in America. People migrate to this country to see their dreams come true. The migrated people find it difficult to adjust with the new culture. In the process of cultural transformation, they lose the roots of their native culture. When they are confronted with a new socio-cultural environment, they struggle mutely to survive. They try to adopt the new culture in vain. Their psyche is torn between the feeling of being without a root and nostalgia.

Dimple of *Wife* undergoes the traumatic process of cultural adjustment in her search for identity. Indian culture nurtures a feeling among young girls that marriage is their door way to happiness. Parents often give little freedom to their daughters. The yearning to taste the fruit of freedom after marriage is summed up by Bharati Mukherjee. Dimple has been pictured having colourful dreams about marriage.

"Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund-raising dinners for notable charities. Marriage would bring her love" (W 3).

With these dreams, she enters the wedlock with Amit Basu, an engineer who is about to migrate to the United States. Her mother-in-law wants to call her Nandini and not Dimple. The change of her name is just a small thing for Amit but to Dimple it is everything. Her re-christening as Nandini is the first estrangement from her identity. Soon after getting married, Dimple comes closer to reality which breaks all her dreams. After marriage Amit is not the man of her dreams. She often has dreams of an ideal man constructed out of "a forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips from a body builder and shoulder adds the stomach and legs from a trousers ad" (W 24).

When Dimple becomes pregnant, she indulges in self-abortion by skipping ropes. She considers that a child will not let her migrate to America. It shows that she tries to free herself from the traditional role of a Hindu wife and asserting her will. She hopes that her new life will begin in the new world. "I want everything to be nice and a new, she whispered on the phone to pixie" (W 42). This shows the aspirations of Dimple. A perfect world is painted in her mind when she migrates. The couple migrates to New York where they stay at Jyoti and Meena Sen's house. On her first day in the New York apartment, she feels like a star collapsing inwardly. She tries to convey her fears and forebodings to Amit, but he does not understand. Both do not stay happily owing to their weak economic condition. Dimple is not happy. She is struck by mental disorder. Amit does not get a job for four months. Amit's delay in getting job frustrates her. The conflict between the protagonist's drive towards a recreation of self and her position as a wife is illustrated clearly. Her life is limited to the private space of the home much more than in Calcutta.

Meena explains to Dimple the facts of how America works. This is expressed when Meena puts her feet upon the coffee table and gives Dimple household hints. 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" (W 70).

One day Dimple goes to the market with Meena Sen to buy a cheese cake. She goes to the shop alone and asks for cheese cake. The shopkeeper starts staring at her. When she repeats the sentence, the shopkeeper asks her whether she does not know the law and searches for something in his drawer. She is afraid. She thinks that the man is taking out his gun and she is left with no option but to be killed without crying. She realises the difference between Calcutta and New York. This first exposure to America leaves a traumatic effect on her mind. She thinks, "She was caught in the crossfire of an American communalism. She could not understand. She felt she'd come very close to getting killed on her third morning in America" (W 60). She has not been out of Calcutta. Her puzzlement with America is due to her sheltered childhood.

Amit and Dimple experience frustration at various levels. Amit faces jitters without a job. Dimple realizes that her marriage is a failure: "She was bitter that marriage has betrayed her had not provided all the glittery things she had imagined had not brought her cocktails" (W 113). She hates Amit as he fails to fulfill her dreams. He is not the man of her dreams. So, Dimple leads a lonely life of assisting Meena Sen, watching T.V or reading newspaper. Through media she is introduced to violence. There are frequent announcements of murders in newspapers, car radio and in casual conversations. She constantly lives in fear of the unknown. Talking about murders in America is like talking about the weather. She contemplates violence and killing. An American divorce her husband for snoring. "The women on television led complicated lives, become pregnant frequently and under suspicious circumstances, murdered, were brought to trial and released; they suffered through the ping-pong volley of their fates with courage" (W 73).

The art of communication between husband and wife is essential to marital happiness. After getting exposed to the alien culture, Amit and Dimple fail to communicate with each other. This failure in communication develops a breach between the couple. The situation worsens when Amit gets a job. He fails

to understand Dimple. He believes providing material comforts alone will make her happy. The couple moves to another flat – a well furnished apartment with all sorts of modern appliances. The living condition of the couple improves, yet they feel lonely.

Dimple is disgust with American English and American system. She is afraid to operate the selfservice elevators. She has to live within the four walls of the apartment. TV is all her cosmos. She indulges in a sense of nostalgia thinking about her peaceful life at Calcutta with her friends. "I'm sorry," Dimple whispered. "There are some things I can't do. Wearing pants is one of them . . . I just don't want to start all this. If I wear pants to eat pizza in the winter, who knows what I'll be wearing to eat at the Dairy Queen next summer." (W 154). "Amit does not feed her fantasy life; he was merely the provider of small material comforts. Born out of this frustration are her seven ways of committing suicide in Queens. From her suicidal thoughts springs the idea of murdering her husband. In bitter moments she ranked husband, blender, colour TV, cassette player, in order of convenience" (W 114). She feels that she would have been a very different person, if she has married someone else "setting fire to a sari had been one of the seven types of suicide Dimple had recently devised" (W 116).

Vinod Khanna, a prosperous businessman offers a job to Dimple. She declines it on her husband's advice. This is because of Amit's doubt about Khana's character. Sexism in America appears very disastrous. The couple Ina Mulick and her husband are evidence to this. Ina, an Indian living in American imitates all bad American habits. She smokes, drinks and possesses post-marital relationships. This influences Dimple badly and leads her to fall in love with Milt Glasser, an American. The Indian women in the flux of race and sexuality turn victims of their own crisis. Dimple is caught in a tradition of passivity, female treachery and covert violence. This leads her to murder her husband later. Dimple must come up with her traumatic mental condition all alone. Milt proves to be a temporary transgression. She is an alienated because of Ina's influence on Dimple. Dimple's character starts changing. Ina is more American than Americans. She is caught in the quicksand of cultural uncertainties represented by the conduct of Ina Mullick, Marsha Mookerji and her brother, Milt Glasser driven to do something to asset her identity. She does not know what to do. She keeps pouring tea over their cups and onto the carpet until they stop her. "After Leni removed the cup Dimple kept on pouring... over the tray... till the pregnant –bellied tea pot was empty and Leni and Ina were standing and shaking her, Dimple, Dimple, stop it" (W 153).

Dimple is left to her own strategies of survival in the new environment. This evolution is reflected in the modulation of her response to the conduct of Milt Glasser. He hugs, embraces and even lifts Dimple onto the top of the kitchen counter. She is at first embarrassed and uncomfortable with him. Slowly she discovers in him a source of emotional support and even recognition of her identity. She turns a rebellion and violates all stereotyped behaviour of Indian womanhood. When Dimple is seduced by Milt Glasser, her isolation and despair become even more acute. Dimple has betrayed of her gendered Indian culture: "She was so much worse off than ever, more lonely, more cut off from Amit, from the Indians, left only with borrowed disguises...[living] like a shadow without feelings" (W 200). Isolated from the world outside and disappointed in Amit. Dimple muses, "Life should have treated her better, should have added and subtracted in different proportions so that she was not left with a chimera" (W 156). At last, she kills Amit, killing him seven times with knife and making herself free from the marriage bond. Her illegal relationship with Milt seems to give an identity in America. As an escape from her adultery, she decides to kill Amit and hide his body in the freezer. Her grievances against the world, release the destructive energies in her. She vacillates between killing herself and killing Amit and plumps for the latter. Dimple seems to be indulging in her passion to become a new woman and lead a very free, exciting life. As she cannot adjust with the cultural conflict, she visualizes her life as dying bonfire. At the end of the novel, Mr. Milt Glasser's frequent visit to her house changed her. She enjoys all the prohibited freedom. She thinks of informing her husband about the relationship she has with Milt. He sits on the counter and spills sugar on the counter. It irritates her. She thinks that it is impossible to live with him. She murders her husband. She is misled by the popular American culture.

Dimple turns into a psychopath after her assimilation into an alien land. She is neither a Bengali wife nor a modern American woman. Every culture has its own strengths and weaknesses. The immigrants often try to find sync between the native culture and the adopted one. But this has resulted in neurotic problems. So, the solution to this problem is retaining one's culture as far as possible even while living on an alien soil.

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