

# Discursive Identity and Transformed Self in *Wife* by Bharatai Mukherjee

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## Abstract

Since the postcolonial debates came to limelight, the very notion of understanding and perceptions of literature is changed and the theoretical stances have proved and challenged multiple ways of interpretations. Bharati Mukherjee, controversial because of her identity issue, at an international level is perceived as an immigrant writer rather Indian or Indian Diasporic writer. Her multiple identities are evident in her fiction. This paper is an attempt to historicize the novel *Wife* in the various contexts of turbulent 1970s, and to identify the discursive strategies employed by the novelist. The transformation of a wife to move away from traditional structures of the East to western form of new woman, through a series of events to deconstruct the colonial attributions to wifhood is the strand of thought, and how finally the decolonizing process is formed a new self is a finding of this paper.

**Keywords:** Colonial construct, self and Other, power hierarchy, Nationalist Project, Decolonization, feminism, trauma, violence, transformation and Self.

## Introduction

Bharathi Mukherjee, defined by some critics as a controversial feminist writer, is associated with multiple identities because of her literary cultivation on the grounds of diaspora, immigration and expatriation. Her literary canon is centered on, rather limited to the lives of educated, upper-middle class Bengali Brahmin women who strive hard to liberate themselves from the oppressions of patriarchal norms and male domination. This phenomenon is mainly shaped by her own life which seems to be the miniature of postmodern experience. Her own identity isn't comprehensible for various reasons such as, at the outset, being a woman from Brahmin family (privileged and restricted) she received her education and values traditionally in Calcutta at her early life. Higher education was carried out in Baroda University until obtaining a double master degree in English and Ancient Indian Culture. She migrated to United States voluntarily where almost all of her writerly strategies were mastered. Her personal life was changed when she attended Iowa Writer's Workshop where she has met and married Clark Blaise swiftly. After all these phases, she had to move and stay in Canada with her husband ending up in being the victim of racism and emerged as a social activist for the rights of women. Then, returned to USA where she rejected her hyphenated identity 'Indian-American' by considering herself as an American citizen with which she tried to settle as an American writer with an outstanding cultural baggage, postmodern sensibility and the spirit of social activism. These all events have shaped her writing in

theorizing the discursive identity and helped her characters to establish a new archetype of transformed self.

Her literary contribution is considerable in the field of diaspora at the early stage, gradually by shifting the paradigm of writing that employed many strategies established her as a naturalized American writer. In doing so, identity and self are the most debated discourses and her strategies found in her literary works, especially at the present literary scenario, since postcolonial studies came into limelight. The representation of these discourses through literature is influenced and modeled by the western philosophical realms of personhood that is vastly marked by colonial powers that are used to justify the control and its maintenance of binaries in the colonies through various strategies in the forms of literature; novel is one of the most influential forms of this kind.

The novel *Wife* (1975) appeared in the second phase of Mukherjee's writing that was marked by her own experience of racism in Canada, where despite being a tenured professor, she felt humiliated and on the edge of being a "housebound, fearful, aggrieved, obsessive, and unforgiving queen of bitterness" (Alam 10). The so called privileged class or caste in India as a Bengali Brahmin identity faces the confrontation in the west. Thus, how novelist makes the protagonist Dimple Dasgupta to negotiate with the new present, meanwhile in this process how the discursive strategy of identity helps to reestablish a transformed self as a new woman is the major focus of this paper.

The term wife is a conscious construction and ideological practice; it assumes more or less cultural attributions for the interpretation. After the free of colonial India this social, cultural and political construct was at question, even from the nationalist project that has involved "an ideological justification for the selective appropriation of the western modernity" (Chatterjee 118) because at this sort of moment the writers have focused mainly on the themes like sati, marriage and its institutionalization, purdah and continuum as well as a break in patriarchal orders to evoke sympathy with the characters and critical thinking with readers on womanhood in India, and to raise the global readership in the capitalist manner. Thus, the writers have tried to represent the same themes on womanhood radically questioning "into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country" (120). Mukherjee's attempt in this novel while portraying Dimple Dasgupta, the protagonist, involves larger frameworks, very influential and prevailing the change in home and society, such as Indian National Emergency (1975), Third phase of Indian feminism and its agenda on the fair treatment of women in social institutions like family, marriage and post-marriage, at work, educational challenges, protection against sex-selective abortion, domestic violence and riots in metropolitan cities because of naxalist-Maoist insurgency in West Bengal.

This work is a fine balance of constituted dichotomy of the world and home, gendered cultural identity and western modernized form of identity, a wife of traditional values and a new woman of critical thinking and so on.

The novel starts, 'Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father was looking for engineers' (*Wife* 1), by introducing the contradiction and dichotomy, on the marriage, between the protagonist Dimple Dasgupta and her father Mr. Dasgupta who happens to be 'an ardent patriarchal man', living in Calcutta. Abrupt beginning of the novel starts with this confrontation of Dimple's dream; rather a right, and father's tension, typifying the opposite discourses are at work. Her dream on choosing a young man for the life of freedom shatters when she had to marry according to the wish of parents, but she keeps her dream alive by imagining that 'Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring

her love' (1). It provides the reader an assumption that her desires are restricted sociologically but not psychologically, it becomes the first shift to live in dual mode where the negotiation of the 'self' start and remains until the end. In other words, this dichotomy inaugurates the conflict between 'big Other' in the form of father, family, patriarchy become the agencies to repress and 'small other' in the form of daughter, her desires and womanhood become the radical thoughts to fight back. This can be identified as a slow formation and split of the self which is validated when Dimple starts conversation on her inferior complex related to her anatomy comparing herself to the modern advertisements, ads in women's magazines on beauty cosmetics, dress and mannerism through the conversation between 'Old-Fashioned Girl' and 'Cute Modern Girl' (4-5) that would seem the split in identities.

The novel follows a linear development of plot with the time and focus on viewpoint of protagonist. In this way, Dimple's desires are not supported by father, mother and she was worried because of her 'non-intractable, sitar-shaped body that made her ugly' this phenomenon signifies her volatile self that does not cope-up with established orders and constructed realities like patriarchy, beauty, obedience, orthodox ceremonies and docile dutiful daughter. The death drive of her psyche started to impose the various types of death images in the forms of disease, a burning body, hospital bed, mysterious pains and sufferings. Dasgupta seems to have perturbed psyche when the family, parents and physiology distress her, she turns to the education which was expected by the matrimonial ads as eligibility to have an ideal man or husband, but the university exams' indefinite postponement too disappointed her in obtaining degree. In spite of her inner turmoil for the freedom, the novelist presents Dimple as colonized by her societal norms working on her through the institutions like, family, education, and womanhood in the form of 'ideological state apparatus' that would repress "...herself at some future date, a good wife, a docile wife conquering the husband-enemy by withholding affection and other tactics of domestics passive resistance" (9). This mode of narration depicts the slow formation of her Passive Resistance through her memorizing the passages from *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance* for university exams the symbolic preparation for the life that yet to begin. With every situation Dimple negotiates to protect her identity. This repression state of mind gets vent when desperate Dimple writes a letter to Problem-walla- 'savior of suffering women, prophet'-that she had never met, to whom she says her bodily problems that she isn't fare, bosomy and expresses her sense of insecurity 'that this defect will adversely affect my chances of securing an ideal husband' (11) and a great sense of the end of life her remarks in the letter "Need I say that I am desperate, almost suicidal? I see life slamming its doors in my face. I want to live!"(11), so the norms and desires at constant fight, signifying her active negotiation for the transformation through passive counter resistance to concept of beauty in the form of letter, concept of death in the form life (I want to live!) but continues to imagine 'an ideal husband'.

But when she was distressed, the marriage evoked erotic fantasies, blush, and a new hope. As expected a 29 year old Amit Kumar Basu, consultant engineer, was matched Dimple, after the short marriage Amit had expected a job in abroad but for Dimple it would be an exile, a metaphorical shift or escape from all her insecurities to a westernized life.

Her identity negotiation continues in her marital life starting from her unBengali name 'Dimple' that serves for 'slight surface of depression, as Oxford dictionary defines, and her being dark complexion. She retains her name by saying that 'Everything' is there in name; she rejects the practice of patriarchal ritual of changing the name. Her marriage was a new phase, rather for new constrains and problems, for her mannerism, to put up more docile mask, adjusting the behavioral patterns and proving to be 'a good Bengali Wife'. She started to realize that her erotic fantasies are eroding, she started to feel, imagine and

compared to ‘baby lizard in the bed’, ‘coiled snake in toilet’ which depict metamorphosis in her ‘self’ and considering that her value as a woman was degraded and mutilated in the form of domestic, sexual violence.

Mukherjee with the third person omnipresent narrator, always try to help the protagonist by providing intellectual input through the magazines, ads, in the form of her friend pixie with syncretism of form in linear narration. For an instance of her identity that was forming up in a radical manner, the following two statements in the form of ‘letter to editor’ would showcase her conscious efforts to negotiate with the culture, cultural wifhood and it’s rejection to form a new ‘self’. At first, Dimple starts learning to question the very framework of wifhood and analyses the cultural epitome of wifhood in the form of Sita, wife of Rama, from the ancient epic the Ramayana and understands that the religion, culture and marriage as social institution that legitimize the forms of oppression on Indian concept of wifhood which was rejected by dimple in her statement “What was the sauce for Sita may no longer be sauce for us-more than our culture glorious culture is withering by the wayside, my dear” (28). Second, to free the women from domestic and stern patriarchal obligations she presents the ‘Divorce-a political and legal empowerment weapon for women’ as a pathway to liberation for “abused wives, a category embracing perhaps twenty crore women in this country, need political power-not tender mercies and comfortable...” (29). This straight forwarded rejection of cultural construct of wifhood in the first letter and seeking the political rights such as ‘Divorce’, to defend her individuality to liberate the collective class of suffering women from domestic violence. The clear assertion of her rationality opposes all norms of patriarchal world. This effort is milestone in this novel that the protagonist tried to free herself from both *home and the world*.

When Amit expects her ‘all life she had been trained to please. He expected her, like, Sita to jump into fire if necessary’ is a norm of male dominated norm with sexual politics. But as a contrary to this, and a radical change can be seen when she became pregnant to avoid the motherhood: new form of legitimatizing and continuum of being suppressed, “she gave vicious squeezes to her stomach as if to force a vile thing out of hiding” (31), ‘Vomiting the pregnancy’ (32), ‘she hated tyrannical fetuses’(34), ‘she had skipped rope until the last of the blood washed off her legs’ because ‘She did not want to carry any relics’(43) but at the same time she could utter herself ‘I could never commit murder!’(43), all these utterances formulate the unwillingness to be a mother is remarking step-out from cultural attributions of motherhood to become a transformed new woman.

Further, the plot shifts to USA where Amit would try to find a job, with his friend Jyoti Sen at New York. After breaking the traditional ways of being daughter, wife and mother she prepares herself to ‘learn to please...new ways in abroad’ (45) thinking that ‘real happiness was just in the movies or in the West’ (48). From here onwards the negotiation of identity shifts to broader spectrums like, nationality, regionalism, immigrant, and resident alien to confront the Western Individuality.

Dimple and her husband Amit went New York with a wish of seeing and building the brand new, fresh life in abroad. Jyoti Sen, friend of Amit, who works there as a chemical engineer gives shelter and presumes to be the caretaker. His wife Meena and daughter Archana start teaching ‘how to be an American’ to both of them. One can see the migrated Indian community, especially from Bengal, who has created an Indian zone for the comfort and support in the course of plot and its development when all migrated characters meet. From this point onwards, the narrator takes the lead, as an autobiographical force of Mukherjee, in introducing the customs of being American, start the formal training of conversation in fluent English, shopping, attending parties, music, television, horrors of civilized free



nation and job hunting for the saving and so on to assimilate in the new society. Few characters also support the lead of the novelist, like the Mullicks, who always say ‘We socialize quite a bit’ (60), the Chakravorthies who relegate ‘would mingle even with Africans!’(62), Miss Bhattacharya for the changed accent in English (62), Vinod Khanna for the ‘real manliness’ according to Dimple. All these characters prove the hybrid version of culture, language, liminal selves and change in the terms of Homi Bhabha. But Dimple remained ‘un-Americanized’ and started to think of homeland, Calcutta sticking to the rhythm of Bengali lifestyle, Indian food habits, table mannerism, and films from Bengal intellectuals. Jyoti suggests her ‘not to restrict herself to Bengalis, or else she miss a lot of the experience of being abroad’ (68). The world of free life that dimple had expected back in India, now waiting for her but the way she remains indoor indicates the reversal of action of the protagonist, with a foreign culture she mediates a new way of assimilation. She still behaves as a wife of Amit ironically and affirms passively his hold on her. She confines herself to know ‘the details of American home life’ and learns the horrors through her reading of ‘newspaper was about complicated lives, death, scary, ugly kind death, random and poorly timed’ (73). The expected ‘*The Guiding Light*’ to get the ‘*Love of Life*’ turns to be a horrid experiences, aggravated conditions have made her less confident, the reality was too far from her imagination. Thus, the identity crisis continues to the core of the plot in second and third parts of the novel.

Though the novelist provides a variety of Americanized Indian women who have socialized and turned to be the changed women, Dimple sticks on to nationalistic project of Indian Womanhood to ‘uphold Bengali womanhood, marriage and male pride’ by articulating ‘...*I do not need any simulations to feel happy in my husband’s presence...my obligation is to my husband*’(78). The power hierarchy of husband and wife, father and daughter continues to be dominant residual of patriarchy. The social ‘big other’ doesn’t allow the ‘small other’ of Dimple to have a new identity, the psychological colonization of woman remains same up to here. The inability of her ‘self’ to accept the newness and forget the fantasy of the freedom and free life inaugurates the instability and insecurity to her and as a bonus to this, Amit start admiring white fair Meena Sen and his jobless condition deprive and limits her to an unhappy life. The great self-reliance of kitchen recipe in the magazine that teaches to stick on to own grand passion, she starts building her identity inwardly and feels the female pride. ‘Dimple experienced him (Amit) in terms of permission and restraints... here in New York Amit seemed to have collapsed inwardly, to have grown frail and shabby (89). The collapse of both femininity and masculinity of the east signifies the decolonization, marking the examination of wifhood in east under the male gaze, and examination of masculinity of the east in western capitalist society would open up new formation of critical thinking. Amit’s insecurities binds him to his enjoyed past life in India, but Dimple starts becoming more American where the gap in relationship grows. Dimple’s expectations were never fulfilled by her husband who was incapable to look after her. So, naturally she starts fantasizing on another man as a revenge on her husband who admires Meena Sen. So, this confrontation of two different modes of thinking of ‘wife’ is clear where in the magazine ‘(there) was woman with her sari wrapped around her like a shroud on the one side, and another woman in bikini with a pert bosom on the other’ (95) the trouble of bad imitation in becoming new is problematized here. Also, it shows the spilt in self is still existing and at constant work.

Her domestic life starts irritating her, bed becomes coffin, and she realizes ‘She was bitter that marriage had betrayed her, had not provided all the glittery things she had imagined’ (102), she assumes her husband is the main reason for her bitterness, and starts finding interest in Milt Glasser who keeps her

dreams alive. This shift in character breaks the Eastern constructs of daughter, wife and mother but Dimple couldn't accept newness in crossing the cultural limitations physically as she keeps Glasser away from her body.

The third part of the novel, becomes her assertion of new life, starts moving out freely, associates in the company of people, expresses her agony to Amit, starts being *constructive* and explains that she has stopped brooding over Calcutta (112), becoming American (112), the dreams are American now (113), understood the pain was part of new beginning of sweet structures of life (115) on the one hand, but in other hand, she starts talking of Nine types to commit suicide, a dying bonfire which becomes the visual image of life in the sleepless nights(119), her death drive becomes more vibrant and makes her to live a secretive life which has cut off glittering alternatives (127), silence started to disturb her and made to talk herself, made unable to distinguish the reality and imagination. Outwardly she started to fit in Marsha's clothing in American style, but inwardly she felt the uneasiness (139). These events are more powerful in shaping the identity for the transformed self. But, 'she still felt like an enemy agent in disguise in her borrowed get-up and borrowed dress (174), and her feet were numb in her borrowed shoes(178), show her inability to live in someone's borrowed image of life. In this situation her dislike on Amit grow, her insomnia completely fails her control over reality, in Amit's words ' it was culture shock and that culture shock happened all the time to Indian wives'(181) for which she felt moody and lighthearted with dried up emotions and values. Finally the novel ends with the murder of Amit by Dimple as a solution for the cultural shock that was imposed and as a means of liberation and decolonization as per Frantz fanon's idea on the violence that is a final way for psychological decolonization.

## Conclusion

Partha Chatterjee's observation, on 'Nationalist Project' on cultural wifhood which disseminates the stereotypes, sufferings in the social agencies of nineteenth century, is deconstructed by Mukherjee's strategies to align western appropriation of it, the use of gender and identity as a strategy to formulate the transformed self from 'Wife' to 'a new woman', give a good narrative energy to prove that the self of Dimple and her identity, is a discursive experience with the culture, family, education, friendship, politics of gender attributions, Americanization with the colonial and cultural baggage and establishing a new transformed self 'Wife' succeeds.

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