

Exploring Female Spaces in Bharti Mukherjee's Wife

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Abstract

The identity of women is always compromised as if it's not the part of human consciousness, they are not provided with enough room to explore their own identity which invigorates suffering, that they are never allowed to experience their core that inculcates their likes, dislikes, opinions so on and so forth which in turns affect their existential growth. Woman's personality is suffocated under the layers of inflicted suppression. No matter whichever land they migrate to the persisting tradition or culture creates a new boundary and a bondage to deal with. No land truly provides liberation for her chained self. In the light of this, the paper intends to examine such cracks or say compressed female spaces of friction that creates dysfunctionality among female curating hysteria, lostness and even self-destruction.

Keywords: Human Consciousness, Female Spaces, Identity, Suppression, Hysteria

The term diaspora is procured from '*diasperio*', a word of Greek origin, it reflects the notion of people dispersing from their cultural homeland to the foreign land. However the works that embodies the experience of diaspora is known diasporic literature, these writing embraces infinitesimal view of psychological cultural and social conflicts affecting consciousness of immigrants. These writings embrace infinitesimal view of psychological, cultural and social conflicts affecting consciousness of immigrants. They oscillate between the haunting reflections of their indestructible inclination towards their homeland and the unfamiliar disconnected environment of foreign land. Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) emphasized, "Diasporic writing is concerned not only of basic geographical distinction but also a whole sense of interest" (Said12). In *The Invention of Canada Literary Text and The Immigrant Imaginary* (1990) Arnold Harrichand Itwarn remarks

"The immigrant writer is not merely the author who speaks about the immigrant experience, but one who has lived it, one whose response is an eruption of words, images, metaphors, one who is familiar with some of the inner as well as the outer workings of these particular contests." (25)

Edward Soja in *Post-modern Geographies: Reassertion of Space and Critical Theory* (1997) states that understanding of the past, it is arduous to curate the picture of present. He comments, "The historical imagination is never completely space less and critical. Social historians have written and continue to write, some of the best geographies of the past" (14). Homi Bhabha in the text *The Location of Culture* (1994) talks about the knowledge of the existence in two cultures is conveyed in the life of immigrants as "the twilight existence of the aesthetic image" (Bhabha, 1994, 15). There's an astounding difference between, the frame of mind and approaches of diasporic male and female writers. Indian woman immigrants are doubly marginalised and subjugated the accumulate endeavour of the women writers developed a new expression of exile and enlarged the horizon of the immigrant literature and feminist

fiction. As Amba Pande *Women in Indian Diaspora Historical Narratives and Contemporary Challenges* (2017) exhibits “Women married into diaspora families attempt to recreate home and culture in a foreign setting often ridden with politics of race. As the indentured labourers, women faced the tyranny of the plantation life as well by exploitation by their own men yet rapidly adapting and liberating themselves through education and economic opportunities” (117). As Jaydeep Sarangi states in *Studies in Women Writers in English* (2005) provide an element of diaspora through his ideology:

“... suffer from cultural shock syndrome. It includes four sequential psychological developments. First is the honeymoon stage- the initial admiration for the foreign culture. Then there is the crisis phase- when one discovers the socio-cultural and sociolinguistic differences. In this stage they suffer from a sense of anxiety and loss. The next is the recovery stage when the puzzle is resolved. In this phase, one tries to pick up alien conventions, including cultural and linguistic behaviour. the adjustment. In this stage one tries to overcome the preliminary shocks of alien culture.” (142)

One of her masterpiece *Wife* (1990) By Bharti Mukherjee reflects the attitude of a Bengali women, Dimple who after her marriage migrate to America with her husband hoping that now she will be free from the tradition conventionality. Her creative brilliance is grounded in the trauma of the assessment and gauging of cross-cultural impact in the arena of globalisation, despite being a powerful artistic force in Mukherjee’s novels, it also reflects as complicated phenomenon. She explores the dimension of the intensely intricate functionality of feminine psyche in a patriarchal surrounding where women constantly put efforts to craft their own spaces whether in her homeland’s cultural environment or as a form of escape in a foreign land. The inadequacy to experience the liberation through the expression of their female sensibility, place them in the archetype of ‘gendered subaltern’. Prof. Shushila Singh in *Indian Women Novelists* (1995) observes: “Bharti Mukherjee’s women characters offer a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organisation and control mechanism. Through her penetrating novel she exhibits the urge of understanding the vacuum female feels within themselves while oscillating between the identities and tradition of their respective homelands as well as foreign land”. (65)

Further, we can observe an abundant role of female diasporic writers as over the period their mentalities and sensibilities developed. Ashalata Kulkarni & Latha Rengachari in the article “Debating Expatriate woman’s Writing” (2015) states:

“In their aim at self-definition and the expression of their expatriate experiences, women from 1970s onwards chose to use literature. Literature became a means of establishing autonomous selfhood. Third world women sought to find words and forms to fit their experiences and have chosen narrative strategies like the auto- biography and the quest novel to do so. They use the autobiography to give shape to an identity grounded in these diverse experiences of expatriation and self-definition.” (Qtd. in Kulkarni, Muse India ,68)

This paper attempts to explore the treatment of female spaces in Mukherjee diasporic novel *Wife* (1990). She is phenomenal Indo-Canadian writer who presented the inner complexities of Indian Woman immigrant. She propounded female oriented poetics to decode the multiplex idiom of cultural diverseness, Michael Connel in an interview with Bharti Mukherjee in *Iowa Review* (1990) writes:

“The Kind of women I write about... are those who are adaptable. We’ve been raised to please, been trained to be adaptable as wives and that adaptability is working to be woman’s advantage when we come over as immigrants.” (Connel 25)

James Clifford in *Further Inflections: Towards Ethnographies of the Future* (1994) says, “...the myths/memories of the homeland, alienation of the host (bad host?) country, desires for eventual return,

ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship.” (Clifford 305)

Stuart Hall in *Modernity an Introduction to Modern Societies* (1996) also penetrates the layers of the identity by stating:

“A distinctive type of structural change is transforming modern societies in the late twentieth century. This is fragmenting the cultural landscapes of class, gender sexuality, ethnicity race nationality which gave us firm location as social individuals, undermining our sense of ourselves as integrated subjects. This loss of a stable „sense of self” is sometimes called the dislocation or – decentering of the subject. This set of double displacements – decentering individuals both from their place in the social and cultural world, and from themselves – constitutes a crisis of identity for the individual.” (596-597).

Indian women diasporic writers have a powerful voice contributing to the treasure of English literature, making it a prolific tool for deeper level of transformation. The suppressed screams that go unheard is reflected in their tapestry of work. Its development is a long thread of realist and psychological development. Female reinvented and put light on the double marginalisation of women in diasporic community. Firstly, they are burdened with the cultural and traditional boundaries of homeland and while they migrate, the foreign land has their own implications. To make it more vigilant and portray the real struggle the women diasporic writers come forth. This assertive vibrational stories by these women bring confidence, understanding and assistance to the generations.

The main plot of the novel *Pirouette* around unceasing yearning of Dimple to search for independence in the manifestation of marriage that will lead take her foreign country, her promising escape to fulfil her desires. The novel begins with the portrayal of Dimple's excitement about her marriage and immigration as she felt it's a gateway to her but with the passage of time, she discovered that the migration only brought a greater sense of isolation, psychological disturbances because in foreign land everything seemed alien to her even her husband who was more inclined towards the modernity and tradition of the foreign land. Her condition is the byproduct of cultural conflict where her identity got brutally suppressed. As Prof. Asani in “Identity Crisis in *the Nowhere Man and Wife*” (1992) states:

“Dimple is entrapped in a dilemma of tension between American culture and society and traditional constraints surrounding an Indian wife, between feminist desire to be assertive and independence and Indian need to be submissive and self-effacing.” (42)

The way in India women is told about the importance of marriage while entrapping their psyche and they are asked to shape their self to become a perfect wife rather than experiencing and nurturing their own identity therefore Simple surrounded herself with the romantic delusion and treated marriage as an escape from the conventional realities. Objectification of women has been an intimate idea of the tradition as we can observe that Dimple was presented as an object of display efficiently carved as a marriage material’ despite of all this’ this bridegroom family started asserting their control over her by calling her name *un-bengali* and frivolous. An attempt to dismantle her expression suffocating her power of discretion, they didn't give her space and respect for her identity.

For Dimple her obsessive illusions about marriage somehow fragmented her reality’ she became too much invested in her own fantasies therefore she was not able to consciously process the reality. After her marriage, all her illusions got destroyed. She could feel the claustrophobia around the ideologies of her in-law, she was not able to ingulf the thought of always pleasing others, her life was not hers anymore. She thought marriage and moving to different country can resolve her deep emptiness and longing and it would offer her space to explore herself and her desires became a more bonded cage. She says, “How hard

it was for her to keep quiet and smile though she was falling apart like a very old toy that had been played with, sometimes quite roughly, by children who claimed to love her” (Mukherjee 212).

Her concept of divine husband completely transported her to the world of her own creation that was utterly out of touch from the pertaining reality, she invested her entire time and energy in crafting her beauty and physique, so that she could attract the preferred and perfect husband. Women in thirst for freedom, feels marriage is an alternative for the liberation they seek to escape the bondages of family. She despises the responsibility of daughter and seek solace in the idea of wife or say role of wife, a beacon of hope that this might provide her with freedom. The way she overindulges in getting the perfect photo for her marriage proposal becoming suicidal because she didn't get the right one depicts her daunting obsession over marriage. Dimple is affected by inferiority complex because she does not fit into the idea of what she thinks beauty is. She is in constant anxious state because feel that her dark complexion and her flat chest can obstruct her to get the perfect match. She did her best to recover from this unfulfilled state as she eats chicken soup did exercises and massages. She feels that it was the face that brings suitable suitors like the celebrities, cricketers, the man that is brewed in her fantasy like novel characters. Bharati Mukherjee states: “Her heart grew vulnerable and paper-thin, transparent as butterflies’ wings. On sunny mornings the sight of boxer shorts hanging out to dry on a neighbour’s balcony made her blush. At night she hallucinated. Sometimes when she entered the bathroom in the dark, the toilet seat twitched like a coiled snake” (Wife 13). She without a flick, consistently focused her entire energy on her imagined future husband who embraces the virtue of a commercial hero. She curates her idealistic man out of the faces she used to observe she in magazines:

“She borrowed a forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips, eyes, and chin from a body-builder and shoulders ad, and the stomach and legs from a trousers ad and put the ideal man by herself in a restaurant on Park Street or by the side of a pool at a five – star hotel. He wore blue bathing trunks, there was no ugly black hair on his back and shoulder blades as he leaped feet first into the pool while she stood on the edge in a scarlet sari with a gold border, behind wraparound sunglasses, and trailed her toes in the water.” (Mukherjee 23)

After her extreme waiting thought she was just 20, she got married to Amit, an engineer, he was not the man of her dream but still she compromised as she was desperate to marry, but soon she realises she got more isolated and caged, her in-laws made her feel more like an outsider, they never accepted her with warm heart, she does everything to establish her place but every move failed, it expanded the rupture in her dreams. Even her husband didn't pay much attention to her. Eric and Marry in *Man Alone: Alienation in Modern Society* (1968) reflects on alienation as,

“Such feelings of sufferings and alienation rampant in young people, drug addicts, immigrants and psychologically imbalanced women, which is described as, life of quiet depression that marks our age. It is a kind of psychological state that refers to psychological disorder, feelings of rootlessness, loneliness, pessimism, meaninglessness and absence of values and beliefs.” (12).

However she thought migrating to America will fuel her dreams and everything will find its rhythm, she again got the shock, it was worse than what she experienced in her homeland, it cracked open her every illusion of love, luxury and fantasies. The critic Lynda Sandler in “Violence as a Device for Problem Solving” (1975) exhibit:

“Dimple suffers from a subterranean streak of violence. She is uprooted from her family and familiar world is projected into a social vacuum where the media become her surrogate community, her global

village. New York intensifies her frustration and unhooks her further from reality; she kills easily like a sleepwalker.” (Sandler 90).

In the novel the destruction of Dimples identity no matter what she dreams of she was always distorted by the external world as said by C.C. Mishra in “Discourses of Displacement: Voices from Canada - A Comparative Study of Four South Asian Canadian Writers” (2002), states:

“In such a situation where the individual is seen as geographically, culturally, linguistically or sometimes psychologically estranged, the whole question of individual’s identity becomes an unattainable ideal.” (Mishra 8)

Dimples personality changes, little confidence that was left got collided, she thought the foreign land will change her dynamics with Amit and she would be able to find her new free self, but everything got dismantled. She prefers to isolate her existence from the external reality of world, which was suffocating to her, the external reality only disturb her silence and create turmoil within her distorted self which she was not able to deal with. Jasbir Jain in “Foreignness of Spirit: The World of Bharati Mukherjee’s Novels” (1989) reflects the turbulence of Dimples character, he articulates, “It is difficult to treat the novel as a study of cultural shock for even life in Calcutta; Dimple is an escapist and lost in her private world of fantasy” (15). Out of irritation she says, “I feel sort of dead inside and you can do is read the paper and talk to me about food... you never listen, and you have never listened to me. You hate me. Don’t deny it; I know you do. You hate me because I’m not fat and fair” (Mukherjee 110). Everything to her seems defeating her, even Amit not expressing him, paying attention to her is choking. Nobody is them to share her inner conflict, everything seems too distant, nothing helps her to recover and connect with reality. Thomas J. Carabas in “Tristes Tropisms: Bharti Mukherjee’s Sidelong Glances at America” (1994) states that Mukherjee portrays:

“Asian men and women who enthusiastically embrace the new world which, among other things, represents security, the possibilities of self- realisation, and liberation from the restraints of the traditional societies in which they were raised” (51). [...] Unlike earlier immigrants who quietly acquiesced to their Americanization, they insist on entering the new world on their own terms. They want more than mere toleration; they want the best their adopted land has to offer.” (52-53)

Every female inherits the want of freedom and expression, moves out of the loop that patriarchy has created for her. According to Anne McClintock’s book *Imperial Leather* (1995) states:

“Controlling woman’s sexuality, exalting maternity and breeding a virile race of empire builders was widely perceived as the paramount means for controlling the health and wealth of the male imperial body. (47)

As Prof Sharad Chandra in “Family and Marriage in Shobha De’s *Socialite Evening*” (1990) talks about Dimple’s Dilemma, she says:

“The new definition of marriage postulates complete sexual freedom with no notion of marital fidelity. Economic security for wife seems to be the corner stone of this marriage arrangement which appear more like a contract than a vibrant living emotional relationship.” (244)

With time again everything disturbed her mental peace, as she was never guided with the right attention and the nourishment of thought that could provide her space to grow and explore her unique expression, as her anger reflects in the following paragraph:

“He (Amit) did not feed her reveries; he was unreal. She was furious, desperate; she felt sick. It was as if some force was impelling her towards disaster; some monster had overtaken her body, a creature with serpentine curls and heaving bosom that would erupt indiscreetly through one of Dimple’s orifices, leaving

her, Dimple Basu, splattered like a bug on the living room wall and rug. The cataclysm embarrassed her.” (Mukherjee 156)

Karen Horney, one of the prolific psychologists exhibits in her book *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1937) talks about the theory concept of “basic anxiety” which puts light upon the obsessive restless brutal feeling of aloofness and helpless, “In the process, the bonds with reality weaken, hurling the individual into the abyss of psychosis.” (198)

The foundational years or say time period of feminine growth is just the time period of inflicting restrictive ideologies, predefined ways, stereotype, compacted archetypes on women, these ideas are so burdening, exploiting, disturbing for a female growth that they deeply suffer the suffocation experience their true reality because of these right and wrongs that there is no space for them to evolve and develop their own raw understanding of life and world. Simone De Beauvoir reflects about woman in her book *The Second Sex* (1949) “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as whole that products this creature, intermediate between male and much, which is described as feminine”. (83)

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