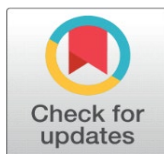
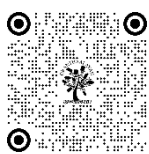


BEYOND BORDERS: INCARNATION OF STRENGTH AND CHANGE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S WIFE

Dr. Monica ¹

¹ Faculty, Delhi University



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.3151](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.3151)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

This paper explores the theme of women's liberation in the works of Bharati Mukherjee, a prominent diasporic female writer, and examines whether the experience of immigration influences the fate, mindset, and lives of women. The writers of the South Asian diaspora, in recent decades, found prominence in the international literary arena. In their fiction, these writers delve into the experiences of migrant characters while also examining themes of displacement and the self-construction of identity, particularly among female characters. The portrayal of women who navigate the challenges of being uprooted from their homeland gains significant relevance when viewed in the context of the expansive Indian subcontinent. The diasporic Indian writers have generally dealt with women characters from their own displaced community but some of them have also taken a liking for Western characters and they have been convincing in dealing with them. Mukherjee's fiction deals with liberated identity of women characters. She talks about the concept of migration and one finds her emphasis on female characters, these women keep struggling for their identity, their psychological suffering and they finally come out as a self-assertive individual free from the shackles of relationships of the past. However, the situation imagined in Mukherjee's text, a middle---class, suburban environment, creates a solitary, transnational identity, lived between countries, where travel between the land of birth and the land of adoption remains accessible.

Keywords: Diaspora, Gender, Status of Women, Patriarchal Society, Marriage and love, Liberation of Women

1. INTRODUCTION

The status of women in India has undergone a dynamic and evolving trajectory characterized by periods of progress and regression. In ancient India, women held an equitable status alongside men, participating fully in various aspects of life. However, with the advent of the Medieval period, their status began to decline due to a range of socio-cultural and historical factors. During this time, women were often deprived of autonomy and subjected to constraints that limited their freedoms. Foreign invasions and wars have significantly impacted the lives and status of women. Many practices that marginalized women, such as Sati and child marriage, emerged during these periods. Since then, women have frequently been subjected to male dominance and treated in a dehumanizing manner. Rather than being recognized as individuals, women are often viewed in relation to men. As a result, women's individual selves lack recognition. During pre- independence period various attempts were made to bring back women's status. It is only after Independence women came forward in all the fields and have acknowledged notable success in the field of education, art, and Culture. After independence not only India acquired an identity of its own even women too struggled hard to attain their own identity. Since the 1960s, the emergence of South Asian women diasporic writers has significantly enriched the field of diasporic literature, complementing the contributions made by male authors in this domain.

The works of male diasporic writers often fail to accurately represent women in alignment with their lived experiences and social positions. Their attempts to explore the inner, psychological journey of immigrant women alongside their external migration experiences appear inadequate. Consequently, diasporic women writers have emerged to articulate the experiences of women through distinctly female perceptions and perspectives. With the rise of women diasporic writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee etc, the image of migrated women is portrayed differently in literature. They concentrated on the emotional world of women and their responses to the world around them. Indian women writers in foreign land are equipped with better themes of location, culture and identity than the recurrent themes like rights of women, injustice, gender inequality and so on.

Iain Chambers views diaspora as a concept marked by fluidity and an ambiguous relationship with both leaving the homeland and arriving in it at the same time. In his book *Migrancy, Culture and Identity* (1994), he notes that that "Diasporas are encapsulated within the unfixed language, histories and identities. In diasporic condition, a stranger is burdened by the new challenged identity, dispersed historical inheritance" and the heterogeneous present" (4-7).

He expands the meaning of "diaspora" by introducing the ideas of being simultaneously 'here' 'there', 'inside', and 'outside.' This suggests a dynamic and multifaceted experience of belonging and identity, where individuals are connected to multiple places and perspectives at once, blurring the boundaries between geographical and cultural spaces.

To come from elsewhere, from 'here' and not 'there', and hence to be simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' the situation at hand, is to live at the intersections of histories and memories, experiencing both their preliminary dispersal and their subsequent translation into new, more extensive, arrangements along emerging routes.(6)

This paper discusses the images of women in the work of a diasporic female writer and tries to find out whether the immigrated status brings any change in the fate, attitude, and life of women. The consciousness of the changed times on the one hand and the socio-cultural mores and values that have bestowed on them a definite role on the other have led to the fragmentation of the psyche of the contemporary Indian woman. Unlike her counterpart of the past, the woman of today is intensely aware of her familial and societal position. Women are caught between tradition and modernity and they are asked to redefine themselves and their place in the family and society. This paper discusses the stories authored by Bharati Mukherjee. The women's world is beautifully portrayed by her and the crisis faced by women is not only regional but universal. Mukherjee's diasporic characters are caught up in the conflict between two countries and its codes. This living between two cultures creates a need and desire to fashion new identities. It deals with the roles of women in India and America, the dilemma to adapt to new ways of life or to cling to the old traditions. Mukherjee has presented those women who are struggling for their identity for themselves and declare their liberty. It focuses on the diasporic women caught between two conflicting cultures. The present work will throw light on how Indian immigrated women experiences contradictions in every sphere of life as they are swinging between the Indian cultural expectations and American life. Bharati Mukherjee is a prominent author of the Indian diaspora. She is concerned with issues related to women specially in her novel, *Wife*.

Mukherjee's fiction deals with liberated identity of women characters. She talks about the concept of migration and one finds her emphasis on female characters, these women keep struggling for their identity, their psychological suffering and they finally come out as a self- assertive individual free from the shackles of relationships of the past. Mukherjee's heroine digs up the cross-cultural conflicts. They embark upon a journey to search their identity which is immersed in emotional and psychological nexus. Iain Chambers views diaspora as a concept marked by fluidity and an ambiguous relationship with both leaving the homeland and arriving in it at the same time.

Her heroines attempt for self-discovery and as a result take control over their fate. Dimple, the female protagonists come across physical, mental, and emotional pain which affects her personality and helps her to turned out to acquire a new identity. Identity encompasses both a personal sense of self and observable characteristics, representing an individual's internal consistency and continuity.

E. H. Erikson described identity as :

"a subject sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image" (Vol.51: 13).

Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* moves around the life of Dimple, a twenty years old, timid, middle- class Bengali girl who is eagerly waiting to be married. She has a romantic disposition towards life, a result of reading novels and film magazines which makes her negate the harsh realities of life. From the very beginning she is different from other girls. She has set

her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father is looking for engineers in the matrimonial advertisements. Here, Mukherjee has shown the tradition which an Indian woman has to follow and it is dominated by patriarchal society. It is the duty of a woman in a male dominated society to mould her feelings to the will of her father. Thus, she believes that marriage is a blessing in disguise which will bring her freedom, fortune and perfect happiness, things she is too subservient to ask for in her own family: "Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love" (3). Dimple desires a different kind of life- "an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris" (3). But at the same time, owing to her traditional upbringing, she imagines herself as "Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legends" (6). She thinks that premarital life is some sort of a dress rehearsal for actual life. What pleases her most is imagining about marrying a man who would provide her all materialistic comforts. Soon Dimple's father finds a suitable boy for her. His name is Amit Kumar Basu, a consultant engineer. He has applied for immigration in Canada and his job application is pending in Kenya. Dimple is excited about her marriage but after marriage her all dreams are shattered. At her in-laws she dislikes everything and her sense of dissatisfaction irritates her. Amit's mother is not quite happy with the name 'Dimple' and instead wants to call her 'Nandini'. This aspect of re-christening, although, common in the Hindu tradition, is something which infuriates Dimple. She wonders whether the new name would cease her being the person she is. She dislikes the new name given to her by her mother-in-law. Can a new name change her identity or make her a new person? Slowly she begins to realize that marriage is something not made for her. The imaginary world that she had so carefully and lovingly created begins to shatter into little fragments. The apartment where she is residing is horrid and so is the interior decoration of the apartment. Suddenly, she finds her expectations to be unfulfilled and she detests herself to be a wife. Even she is disappointed by her pregnancy.

While she is excited about going abroad, she does not want to "carry any relics from her old life" and wants everything to be nice and new (42). To get rid of the contemptible foetus she begins "eating hot green chilies in the hope that her body would return to its normal cycle" (30). Her fanatically killing of the mice suggests her uneasiness with her own pregnancy. At last, she skips for the process of abortion. 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. (42) With such a step she brought a sort of evolution in her personality. She regenerates herself as she has never done before. She retires herself from the traditional role of a Hindu wife by withdrawing her motherhood. The life of New York seems destructive to her and provides little freedom to Indian house wives. She feels isolated from her new surrounding and finds that there is great disparity between her fantasy world and the real world. Instead of showing signs of improvement, she goes worse. She is completely alienated and has nothing to look forward to. In this new world too, Dimple is hardly permitted to talk of liberation and cannot assert her will. She tries to adopt the modernity and openness of the new land but cannot afford to do so either on account of money or due to her inhibitive and shy nature. Sen's apartment is completely contradictory to what she had imagined.

As C.C. Mishra explains:

"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).

Even in America, Amit decides her fate and put constraints upon her. At her first party in Manhattan, Dimple encounters the diaspora of Indian and Pakistani immigrants who provide varying examples of the ways in which being "Indian" is in conversation with being "American." She hears about Ina Mullick, the Bengali wife whose careless husband has allowed her to become "more American than the Americans" (68). Dimple quickly learns that Amit is sharply disapproving of women who go to college, wear pants, and smoke cigarettes: "with so many Indians around and a television and a child, a woman shouldn't have time to get any crazy ideas"

(69). The options of education and employment are removed from Dimple's grasp as soon as she begins to consider them, leaving her wondering what her new role in this place will be. Mukherjee inserts Ina Mullick into Dimple's life as a challenge to the restrictions of traditional wifehood: "Well Dimple...what do you do all day? You must be bored out of your skull" (76). Ina has adopted what Jyoti calls "women's lib stuff" and Dimple is warned of her "dangerous" influence (76). In this way the Sen's have cautioned Amit to keep Dimple away from Ina Mullick so that the former may not get corrupted by her ideas.

As a result, Amit forbids Dimple from even accepting Ina's drink: "She does not like alcoholic beverages," Amit said. "She does not even like Coke" (77). She is frustrated with Amit who fails to provide her not only physical comfort but also

emotional comfort. Her frustration increases and she begins having repulsion for Amit. She begins comparing her husband with the ideal man of her fantasy world and to her disgust soon realizes that he is not the man of her dreams. Lack of job makes him self-centered and insensitive. He is oblivious to the emotional turmoil of his wife. When Dimple prepares the salad with great care, he refuses to have it. He even turns down her offer of fixing his tie. Hence the gap between them keeps on increasing and soon Dimple cuts herself away from him to become an introvert. He fails to satisfy her in all aspects- physical, mental, and emotional. He remains indifferent to her psychological imbalances and insomnia.

She has various complaints against life. She remains confused and frustrated even when they move to the bigger apartment of Mookherjis'. She turns to Ina, Leni and Milt Glasser for support but to they fail in providing her with permanent comfort. Her rebellious spirit generates in her an inner violence and converts her into a glum killer devising almost seven ways of committing suicide. "Her own intensity shocked her-she had not considered herself susceptible to violence" but gradually "she began to realize that violence was right, even decent" (117). Dimple's seduction of Milt is an attempt to find her own identity in America. Dimple tries modern dresses of Marsha but they fail to provide her comfort and stability.

She is torn between the feminist need to be independent and assertive and the traditional Indian need to be submissive and self-effacing. Finally, out of depression and disgust, she takes out the knife from the kitchen drawer, chooses a spot near her husband's hairline and stabs him repeatedly at the same place seven times. Seven stabs are symbolic of liberation from the bondages imposed by matrimony. Dimple frees herself from the constraints of relationships and regenerates herself through blood.

Thus, this final act of Dimple shows her complete transformation from subjugation to liberation. It proves to be negative and descending and is quite contrary to the changes in Jasmine and Tara Lata who are other female characters of Mukherjee's novels. Had she lived in India, she would have either reconciled to her frustration or ended up. It's all because of the culture that she stabbed him.

Otherwise she would have herself committed suicide instead of stabbing husband. She would have accepted it as her fate since she would be made to realize that for an Indian wife, her husband is everything. It is the American notion of freedom which makes her act as a rebel against the conservativeness of her dominating husband and helps her get rid of all the predicaments that lie as obstacles in the way of her desired life. She evolves inwardly from an obedient, submissive, and typical Indian wife into a psychic murderer to attain freedom.

In a Patriarchal society, women find themselves in shackles of oppression and suppression. Women can only dream of liberation if their male counterparts consider them equivalent to themselves and understand their importance in uplifting the society.

The aim of *Wife* is to narrate, not only Indian immigrant women's presence or absence in the private and the public space, but also in the social, cultural, and economic context.

Mukherjee in her novel *Wife* deals with this aspect of liberating a woman from the feudal society who owing to her immense strength forges her identity on the American soil.

Mukherjee has portrayed the transformation of a docile Indian wife into an aggressive Indo- American woman. Though the country has made a lot of progress, the role of Indian women in society is minimized. Gender discrimination is a universal practice in human history. Subsequently, the position of women has certainly been enhanced and women have now certainly got a status in society. They are required to experience development of their mind, body, and soul. The Indian woman has not only to liberate herself from the suffocation of male dominance, but also must fight against the patriarchal subjugation. Bharati Mukherjee's writing is striking because in her novels one finds the novelist rising above the stereotype. Her refusal to make assumptions about Indian women, their marital happiness, and its satisfactions sets her apart from the conventions of female depiction.

The portrayal of Mukherjee's protagonist becomes intriguing at this point because the protected space of feeling and devotion is invaded by the other adopted country, which is the intersection of one's own country. Mukherjee wants her women to struggle for their rights, against home oppression, and against men's disparaging attitudes to create a better world. To find their potential and recognize their value, the women must get past their crushing humiliation, emptiness, and feelings of worthlessness.

Consequently, Bharati Mukherjee's diasporic characters like Dimple is embodiment of the traits of such a woman who has been known as liberated woman. They fly high and hammers the limitations of their cultural system to make their voices heard and to be a fit in the mainstream of the world.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Mukherjee, Bharati, *Wife*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Alam, Fakrul. *Bharati Mukherjee*. New York: Twayne, 1996.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- E. H. Erikson, 'Reflections on the Dissent of Contemporary Youth', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 51 (1970), p. 13.e
- Chambers, Iain. *Migrancy, Culture and Identity*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print
- Jasbir Jain, 'Foreignness of Spirit; The world of Bharati Mukherjee's Novels,' *Journal of Indian writing in English* 1985.
- Kumar, Nagendra. *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: A Cultural Perspective*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2001.
- Mishra, C.C. "Discourses of Displacement: Voices from Canada - A Comparative Study of Four South Asian Canadian Writers." *Studies in Literature in English* Vol. II, edited by Mohit K. Ray. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002.
- Patil, Mallikarjun. "Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*: A Post-Modernist Novel." *Indian English Fiction: Readings and Reflections*, edited by Gajendra Kumar, New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2003.
- 10 Tandon, Sushma, *Bharati Mukherjee's fiction: a Perspective*, New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2004.