The Feminine Anguish Explored In Wife by Bharati Mukherjee

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Abstract

Bharathi Mukherjee’s heroines are intrepid and firm. They have the strong potential for compliance; they live in the dense land of actuality and accept the sour truth of their lives. The present study aims at discussing, the feminine anguish explored in Wife by Bharati Mukherjee. She has tried to create a new relationship between man and woman based on equality, non-oppression, non-exploitation so that the resourceful latent of both capitalizes on as individuals and not gender dichotomies. The male, as an envoy of the patriarchal society has, at last, being wrenched off the center of woman’s gravitation. The woman is preparing now to be her own gravitational force, beyond the fullness of patriarchy. Dimple in Wife fails to stride the path or play the societal roles traditionally assigned to an Indian woman. She is a symbol of a typical, acquiescent Indian housewife who patiently abides all the plights afflicted with her by the male dominated society.

Keywords:

Compliance, Dichotomies, Acquiescent

1. Introduction:
Bharati Mukherjee is a prominent author of the Indian Writings in English who has induced the study of feminism in her writings. She is widely eulogized as the finest of her cohort of Indian writers in English. Mukherjee is a writer who investigates through her fiction the meaning of life. Concerns related to women are central to the vision of Mukherjee in her novels. The significant feature of her women characters is that they have the strength of their own and in spite of confronting and warfare, they remain uncrushed. Mukherjee has been tagged a feminist for her portrayal of the quandary of middle class educated Indian women, their inner divergence and hunt for identity, marriage, sex and their abuse and disenchantment.

Mukerjee’s novels generally centered on family relationships, especially the relationship between husband and wife. Her female protagonists are insightful, anxious, luminous and inventive. Initially fatalities of self denial they are in conflict with their internal selves because they ignore their real stance. Her major concern as a creative writer is to find and preserve women’s identity as daughter, wife, mother and most important of all as human beings. The condition of women has gradually changed globally and the docile female has succumbed place to the enlightened woman. The grade of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few centuries.

2. Methodology

2.1. Dimple, the Victim of Phallocentrism

Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* (1975) hubs round the life of Dimple, twenty years old, timorous, middle-class Bengali girl who is eagerly waiting to be married. She has multihued dreams about marriage. Dimple has fixed her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father is looking for engineers in the matrimonial advertisements. It is the feminine duty of a woman in a male dominated society to vanquish her feelings and desires to the will of her father. Thus she deems that marriage is a sanction in camouflage which will bring her sovereignty, kismet and great happiness, things she is too acquiescent to ask for in her own family. But the anecdote of
girls belonging to middle class is different. They are sent to school and college and requisite to help senior ladies of the family in the kitchen and other household work in their free time more as a part of their training. They get romantic ideas about love and marriage, but have no clear-cut idea of the person, who, they think, would be compatible with them or who they would like to marry. After their school or college education is over, begins the period of waiting for them (husbands). They wait till some boy from amongst the various boys her parents have sent the proposal of her marriage to says ‘yes, I will marry her’. They feel happy to see the relief in their parents’ faces and feel happier if the boy happens to be fair and handsome, is well qualified and has a good well paid steady job. Here Dimple, dreams of marrying a neurosurgeon and hopes that,

“Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund raising dinners for notable charities. Marriage would bring her love”. (p1).

With these dreams after her desperate waiting, finally, she enters the wedlock with Amit Basu, an engineer who is about to migrate to the United States. Dimple is a touchy, young girl, who undergoes a great mental ordeal born of her marriage to a much older, business-like, matter of fact Amit Basu. He is numb towards her physical and emotional requirements and thus there is considerable divergence in their attitudes. She doesn’t like Amit’s mother and his sister. After getting married, Dimple comes closer to reality which shatters all her dreams. She has always lived in an implausible world, a world which is created by Dimple. But when she tackles the hard realities of life the feathers of her imagination are clipped. She thinks that Amit is not the man of her dreams and he was not the man she has imagined for her husband.

In general, pregnancy is a fortunate thing for Indian women, but Dimple is particular in that she thought of ways to get rid of. So she decides to lapse her pregnancy. This is her first act of allegation marks the instigation of her evolution. She frees herself from the traditional role of a Hindu wife by rescinding her motherhood. 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 In order to get rid of the vile fetus she skips her way to abortion. She had skipped rope until her legs grew numb and her stomach burned; she had poured until the last of the blood washed off her legs; then she had collapsed.” (p42).

Dimple accepts a life of tameness for herself. Dimple’s assessment of her relationship with her husband points to an unhappy. To her, married life becomes agonizing and droning, as it moved in a fixed pattern. Initially, Dimple tries to fulfill his desires by being a duty sentient Indian wife, but when she finds that he is insensate towards her emotions and feelings, she becomes quiet and flaccid. Dimple gradually transforms into an individual with her own identity and initiates to lead a life on her own stipulations and circumstances.

Dimple in wife, is signified the dilemma of a voice without articulation and without a vision. Her husband’s extreme supremacy smothers her and she feels ensnared in marriage. Ultimately, all her efforts to conciliate with life fail. Life becomes so muffled and futile that she sets herself ablaze. Finally, she is able to evaluate her expectations of life and realizes the emotional aggravation and ordeal she has undergone by being silent and flaccid. She evolves into a woman with her own identity, having gained marvelous courage and self confidence.

2.2. Disappointments in Love

On her first day in the New York apartment she felt like a star collapsing inwardly. She tries to convey her fears and forebodings to Amit but neither does he try to recognize her, nor is he capable of rising above a monotonous understanding. The two do not stay happily owing to their weak economic condition. She hates Amit as he fails to fulfill her dreams. He is not the man that she wants to marry. Dimple’s psychological imbalances, her effusive daytime sleeping, her nightmares, and indecisiveness everything remain unknown to Amit up to his dying day. He could not understand her feelings as a result of which she was torn from within. The art of communication between husband and wife is essential to marital happiness. This estrangement
between Dimple and her husband reminds one of Anita Desai’s *Cry the Peacock* where an ever widening gap in communication between Maya and her husband is felt throughout the novel. Their married life is punctuated all along by “matrimonial silences”. After getting exposed to the alien culture, Amit and Dimple fail to communicate with each other. This has a telling effect upon their relationship. This failure in communication develops a breach between the couple which widens day by day and ultimately ruins their relationship.

Dimples disgust with American English and American system gets accentuated even in small things. She is afraid to operate the self-service elevators. She has to live within the four walls of the apartment. TV is all her cosmos where she watches the endless violence and murder. She hates American English and American system of life. She indulges in a sense of nostalgia thinking about her peaceful life in Calcutta with her friends. She finds it difficult to share her inmost heart, even to her husband. Thus she suffers from an abnormality of mind and from the crisis of culture.

“She is scared of self-service elevators, of policemen, of gadgets and appliances. She does not want to lose her identity, but feels isolated, trapped, alienated, marginalized” (p13).

When she fails to relate to the real world, she tries to relate to the unreal world shown on the T.V. But this provides wrong solutions to the real problems. Amit may also be blamed for his ignorance of female psychology. He thinks that providing creature comforts is enough and hardly bothers for her emotional needs. He takes her out of four-walls very rarely and goes on admonishing instead:

“You must go out, make friends, do something constructive, not stay at home and think about Calcutta (p111).

Through media she is introduced to violence and added to this she hears about more murder. There were 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 was
like talking about the weather. She contemplates violence and killing. An American woman divorces her husband for snoring. Even the American cinema displayed only sex and violence. Evidently, Dimple is caught in a tradition of passivity, female treachery and covert violence. Many more news about Americans barbarous acts of violence, sex and bloodshed do not go without frightening and corrupting Dimple. In fact, this leads her to murder her husband later.

Dimple wants to dream of Amit, but she cannot. 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. From her suicidal thoughts springs the idea of murdering her husband. She feels that she would have been a very different person that she had married someone else who, unlike Amit would have altered her and showed all affection and attention on her. Dimple’s attitude towards her husband and family life made to think that her married life is a loveless one to an extent which is the main cause for her to drift away from her husband. It is a frustrating and depressing ordeal that Dimple has undergone. It will be a disgusting experience to live with a man who does not love the woman the way she expected him to do. This is a common experience for many women in the contemporary society. At the same time, these women encounter a social problem which is nothing but the brand they get from the society as deserted women.

2.3. Acquiescent Indian housewife

Dimple realizes that women do have power, wielded in a devious way; because they are suppressed by their husbands, they revenge themselves on their sons and daughters. Dimple has more expectations from life because her father had made her feel special. Despite all the progressive ideas Dimple has, she is a role model of Indian married woman’s mind. Dimple is not a revolutionary character, but wants to be different from the regular housewife lifestyle. She willingly surrendered herself before him. She thought that the women of old believed that the greatest good luck for them was to die before their husband’s death.
The difference between the outlook of Dimple and Amit is so marked that they fail repeatedly to understand each other. This greatly affects their marital life. It becomes more of a compromise than a relationship based on love or mutual understanding. It is a purely arranged marriage. Amit is an engineer who cares for money, status and material comforts. Dimple, away from her routine, is now prepared to look at herself with utmost objectivity and takes it as an opportunity to examine her relationship with her husband. She realizes that a natural and harmonious relationship does not exist between them. They are unable to express real and genuine feeling to each other. Dimple is an intense thinking woman, eager to probe the meaning of marriage and love and of life itself. There is no bridge of understanding and love between them. However, he had only shown her his heart. Finally, in a fit of frenzy, 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 symbols of liberation from the bondages imposed by matrimony. Dimple frees herself from the constraints of relationships and regenerates herself through blood. She evolves inwardly from a docile, obedient, submissive and typical Indian wife into a dejected, psychotic, sick and furious murderer in order to attain individual freedom.

Since women had started to question the bondage and oppression implicit in traditional religious institutions and social practices, they tried to recast their identities, create new roles for themselves in accord with the assertion of their identities that often differed from patriarchal cultural constructions of female roles like man to rule and woman to obey; the man, the master, and woman, the slave; man, the god, and woman, the devotee; man in the field and woman for the hearth and so on. They contested the patriarchal discourses on womanhood characterized by virtues like chastity, purity, ability to bear pain and suffering. However, the paradoxical reality is that they cannot completely free themselves from the chains of the traditional value system. Woman as fragmented, with the duality of self, who struggles hard to fight for her rights and assert her individuality; yet has to live as a wife subservient to her husband, as a daughter obedient to her father, or as a mother with an infinite amount of self-sacrifice for her children.
Dimple, the protagonist of *Wife*, is the perfect example of the gloom of women in India. She suffers due to the callous and non-responsive attitude of her husband. Her husband treats her as a mere object subjected to his will as a result, there is a complete loss of her identity. The other important aspect which Bharathi Mukherjee highlights in this and other novels is a woman’s role in the oppression and suffering of her fellow woman. There is no indication that Amit’s murder suggests a beginning, if only because it ends the novel and leaves Dimple deranged. Because she falls to such a state of insanity and loses all self possession, one cannot consider this murder parallel to her abortion, either. For Dimple, ending her pregnancy implies the possibility of a new life completely devoid of vestiges of India, but her entire stay in America shows the impossibility of that distinction. Dimple does not wholly fail, though, because she acts and asserts her individuality apart from the role governed by a cultural history.

Traditionally it was believed that women were essentially different in character from men. This was a convenient necessity because it was mentioned they were here on earth for a different purpose than a man. A woman’s ability to fight back is her biggest strength. Today's woman has not only crossed the so-called tag of housewife in fact has become a household manager. Inherited with the managerial skills; today a woman is successfully balancing their social, personal and professional life, along with playing varied characters of day-to-day life, such as wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, a colleague at the office, sister, mother and etc.

3. Outcome

The novel, *Wife* attempts to break the silence thrust on women and their position in society by the domineering males. It depicts the suppressed feelings, aspirations and anguish of women and also challenges the men to alter their attitude to give women their due rights and dignity. The heroine might try to be assertive or might sink in indifference. However, she admits there is scope for growth and change. Through the character of Dimple, in the novel, *Wife*, Mukherjee has thus expressed the ambivalent attitude of contemporary educated women in India
who can neither reconcile themselves to a new situation when their husbands ignore them and crush their ambition in life nor cast off their husbands simply because the husband is like a sheltering tree they cannot afford to live without. In a way, Dimple is a representative figure of the modern woman who resents her husband’s callousness. The character of Dimple represents the modern woman ambivalent and becomes the victim of circumstances. By implications, attitude the character of Dimple represents the modern women’s ambivalence to married life. She has undoubtedly gained the moral courage and necessary resourcefulness required to have such principle.

4. Conclusion

Hence the traditional suffering of woman in silence has come to be broken with assertion, courage and determination in order to march towards progress for self- fulfillment and peaceful life. Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means, particularly subordination to man; for masculine status is far from extermination, resting still upon frozen economic and social functions. Small remedies gainsay the notion that women are weak. They have the implausible strength to break the fetters customary in our society and to exercise their freedom.