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## **Marginalized in a World Dominated by Phallic Images and Male Endeavors: Bharati Mukherjee's Woman Protagonist in *Wife***

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### **Abstract**

*A notable recurrent feature of Mukherjee's novels is that they tend to depict fundamentally problematized new immigrant women who as immigrant subaltern are forced to undergo a series of transformations before they can become fully-fledged, self-confident and self-aware members of American society in negotiating the fixed and static borders. In these five novels, each woman is metamorphosed from one ethnic identity into another. In the earlier two novels, *Wife* and *Jasmine*, this metamorphosis occurs alongside and in the wake of a physical move from India to America. In *The Holder of the World*, this physical move occurs in reverse, as the novel's heroine, Hannah Easton, travels to South India, where she becomes an Indian concubine. In *Leave It to Me*, the central female character undergoes a voluntary transformation that tracks a physical and psychological search for her Indian roots. In each case, this transformation is captured by a name change, as the female protagonist adopts multiple identities, each representative of a different stage in the process of adopting a new identity.*

**Key Words:** *desire, identity, amnesia, gender, race, Globalisation dislocation, conflictual assimilation, fusionism, in-betweenness, hyphenation, assimilation, migration, exilic exclusions.*

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Home in a diasporic condition is either disintegrating or being radically redefined. In her personal life Bharati Mukherjee witnessed the anguish of Indians both as expatriates and immigrants and in that given situation, Indian life, Indian values, rituals, fidelity to traditions and the grace of human relationship in social and religious modes of existence constantly stirred her imagination and moulded her creative sensibility. The preservation of Indian cultural ethos is neither a sole sentimental quest in her life nor a photographic representation made by an 'outsider.' It is endowed with deep emotional and psychological significance. It endows her vision with a rare humanitarian quality and universal appeal. In one of the interviews to Alison B. Carb, she categorically points out:

*I was born into a Hindu Bengali Brahmin family which means, I have a different sense of self existence and of immortality than do writer like Malamud. I believe that our souls can be reborn in another body, so the perspective I have about a single character's life is different from that of an American writer who believes that he has only one life.<sup>i</sup>*

The affinity to Indian soil and culture is rooted in the mental map of Bharati Mukherjee. And hence her approach to life and its complicated pattern of struggle is designed and shaped in a peculiar narrative structure. To quote Maya Manju Sharma- 'In her fiction Mukherjee handles

Western themes and settings as well as Characters who are Westernized or bicultural. Yet she is forced to admit that the very structure of her imagination is essentially Hindu and essentially moral.’<sup>ii</sup>

However, the critics like Mala Shree Lal still express their aversion to the Indian sensibility, scattered in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee and considers her only as an ‘outsider’ over- reacting to her native Indian tradition of typical Bengali origin. Mala Shree Lal’s argument is:

*Mukherjee has deliberately problematised her identity perhaps overreacting to the likelihood of being enclosed in a coterie culturally, geographically and ideologically separate from her chosen home and citizenship. One must allege here that her sense of Indianness is narrow, restrictive somewhat bigoted for no writer is characterized by his or her passport details. What matters is the literary material to which imagination is superimposed.*<sup>iii</sup>

Bharati Mukherjee through her female protagonists expresses her concern for the problem of dislocation and assimilation, the assimilation of traditional Indian mode of living with new materialistic values encouraged by American society. Fear, constant anxiety, the obsession of not belonging, the panic of the New World, consciousness of Indian spiritualism and assimilative fusionism are the recurrent motives in the novels like *Jasmine*, *The Tiger’s Daughter*, *Wife*, *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*. Her *The Holder of the World* and *Leave It to Me* deal with the issues of reverse diaspora not included in detail in this study. Commenting on this aspect in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, Pushpa N. Parekh remarks- ‘Fear, anger, pain, bitterness, confusion, silence, irony humour as well as pathos underline her observations as she discovers for herself the undefined medium between the preservation of old world and the assimilation into the new.’<sup>iv</sup>

Mukherjee also commonly engages in what might be termed as contested subalternity. An analysis of Mukherjee’s novels –especially her earlier ones– confirms this view, although in so doing she also sometimes reveals (as in *Wife*) a far more ambivalent, and at times even negative, portrait of immigrant life, one which is sometimes strikingly at odds with her multicultural vision. Mukherjee says- ‘Others who write stories of migration often talk of arrival at a new place as a loss, the loss of communal memory and the erosion of an original culture. I want to talk of arrival as gain.’<sup>v</sup>

A notable recurrent feature of Mukherjee’s novels is that they tend to depict fundamentally problematised new immigrant women who as immigrant subaltern are forced to undergo a series of transformations before they can become fully-fledged, self-confident and self-aware members of American society in negotiating the fixed and static borders. In these five novels, each woman is metamorphosed from one ethnic identity into another. In the earlier two novels, *Wife* and *Jasmine*, this metamorphosis occurs alongside and in the wake of a physical move from India to America. In *The Holder of the World*, this physical move occurs in reverse, as the novel’s heroine, Hannah Easton, travels to South India, where she becomes an Indian concubine. In *Leave It to Me*, the central female character undergoes a voluntary transformation that tracks a physical and psychological search for her Indian roots. In each case, this transformation is captured by a name change, as the female protagonist adopts multiple identities, each representative of a different stage in the process of adopting a new identity. Each woman – *Wife/Sita/Dimple*, *Jyoti/Jasmine/Jane*; *Hannah Easton Fitch Legge/Salem Bibi/ ‘Precious as Pearl’* and *Debby/Devi* – undergoes radical changes that are sometimes voluntary, but more often are the unjust requirements of a society prejudiced of distinction and intrinsically unstable, contingent and relational.

Mukherjee's characters do not simply *claim* America, they *transform* it, but in a different way in each novel. Uma Parameswaran has noted that a characteristic feature of much Indian expatriate writing is the inability to either 'wholly repatriate' or 'wholly impatriate.'<sup>vi</sup> *Wife* demonstrates this inability since Mukherjee leaves her central character stranded midpoint at the end of the novel. In contrast, in *Jasmine*, according to Gurleen Grewal, the eponymous character Jasmine is a 'born again American.'<sup>vii</sup> Bharati Mukherjee seems to assert that in the process of assimilations, one seems to experience reinscription and grafting before being located after dislocations. In the process of mutative change and translation, the immigrants can neither adopt alien culture nor can leave their culture of 'home' and finally a new hybrid culture comes to flourish in a new location after disjuncture. This 'race difference doubling and splitting'<sup>viii</sup> results in 'cultural enunciations in the act of hybridity, in the process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences.'<sup>ix</sup>

Thus 'Location' has become to a great extent an absorbing preoccupation with the postcolonial writers, especially the postcolonial immigrant writers. Exiled by choice or circumstance, the immigrant woman finds displaced from her roots, her antecedents, and her centre. She sheds her monolithic national and regional identity and becomes a repository of dualities and multiplicities. Her position as an outsider in the country of her adoption leaves her to create a distinct geographical and textual space that is contrary to the colonial discourse. In her novels Bharati Mukherjee has consciously created a cultural myth that is rooted in a multi-dimensional projection of the history and culture of the countries to which such women belong. About geographical boundaries and margins Said's point of view is important:

*The geographic boundaries accompany the social ethnic and cultural ones in expected ways. Yet often the sense in which someone feels himself to be not-foreign is based on a very unrigorous idea of what is "out there," beyond one's own territory. All kinds of suppositions, associations, and fictions appear to crowd the unfamiliar space outside one's own. [...] Yet there is no use in pretending that all we know about time and space, or rather history and geography, is more than anything else imaginative. There are such things as positive history and positive geography which in Europe and the United States have impressive achievements to point to.<sup>x</sup>*

Mukherjee's thinking is chained to the paradigms of Western thinking. Caught within a system of binary oppositions that label her as an outsider, and the 'other', she tends to highlight differences and unstable configuration and assumes an exclusivity that negates the dominant principles within hegemonic Western discourse. Yet this projection of contrariness and difference basically arises out of a social content in which fixation is translated into a new location in contrast to racial and cultural stereotypes. Thus the cultural space that is created is crisscrossed by a series of dislocations, dissensions, and the location becomes a transcription and translation of the originary into a new ambivalent identity.

Amit's ideology and life-style confirm that he is a thorough-bred 'expatriate.' His mission in the United States is to earn money. He does not feel comfortable in the company of American guests in parties. So he often bounces back to the company of Meena and Jyoti Sen. But, Amit has a few strategies to survive in an alien culture. He has mastered the popular American catch phrases suggestive of challenge, crisis management and confrontation which help him to communicate with Americans very effectively. However, he does not show interest either in imbibing American culture or in contributing to American culture.

His dream is to return to India and settle down in a posh locality in Calcutta. Well steeped in 'expatriate' sensibility, he easily slips into the company of Indian 'expatriates' in Queens. From day one, Amit is worried about his job. He is quite oblivious of the culture in which he lives. His mindset has been well moulded by other 'expatriates' in Queens. Amit does not express any wonder or surprise at the enormity of America. He does not know how to interrogate or negotiate with American reality for cultural space.

Like any other Indian 'expatriate', he lives on the fringes of American society. Naturally, his experience in America is quite limited. It does not broaden his perspective and therefore it does not open up new avenues for him. He acts and reacts like an average 'expatriate.' He does not want to send Dimple for a job in Khanna's Emporium. As a male chauvinist, Amit snubs Dimple every time he gets an opportunity. Amit silences her whenever she expresses her curiosity about Americans. That is mainly responsible for turning Dimple inward.

Though Indian in origins, Ina, the prototypical American, does not typify blending or hybridity. Her Americanization is no longer a process but a practiced, negotiated and accepted fact. Her action is of pure balance between herself and America. Ina's theory replaces one with the other. According to Ina, total severance from the past is a precondition to assume an American identity. In the trans-cultural trajectory of the immigrants, the transformation is very often multidirectional. The immigrant's entry in to a foreign land is not to cause disruption; it is in another way to redefine one's nationness. She is terribly tossed in the conjunction of inclusion and exclusion, honour and humiliation. In a coercive condition of her being, her very existence is challenged. She does not know where she stands between respect and repudiation

And this process is not transgressive or corruptive; it implies post nation fluidity and change. As a new entrant from another culture, the conspicuous immigrant lands in to a conflictual space. This creates an existential stress highlighting the fissures in the process of assimilation. The patriarchy that Ina and Dimple experience is not simply that of the industrialized first world, they must also grapple with the ways in which they have been named by their own specific cultural context. Thus Mukherjee demonstrates the fact that women's subject positions are varied and multi-layered. So the Western feminist rhetoric cannot supply role models for 'Dimples' and 'Jasmines'.

Dimple is an instance of the dislocated and ruptured self of an Indian wife finding herself out of depth in a foreign country with an alien milieu. This situation of cultural shock is too trite to new analysis, but essentially it is the agony of a voice struggling for identity and getting stifled repeatedly where, the female voice denied an equal status and force.

She is drawn into the *fantasies of cosmopolitan plentitude*. As a being she remains the same *edible* and a partial woman who desperately searches for an ejection out of her inadequacies and incompleteness. She resorts to violence and her sadistic craze is symptomatic of the prevalent turbulence in the American society. It is this pervasive ambience of crime that her feeling of guilt is mitigated. This insidious atmosphere of crime dulls the edge of her own guilt. Mukherjee puts her own sensibility in portraying the heroine of the novel that washed over the manuscript:

*I was writing a second novel, Wife, at the time, about a young Bengali wife who was sensitive enough to feel the pain but not intelligent enough to make sense out of her situation and break out. The anger that young wives round me are trying to hide had become my anger and that washed over the manuscript. I write what I hoped would be a wounding novel.<sup>xi</sup>*

The act of killing Amit is thus, purely out of disappointment and dislocation from her imaginary world, it is out of her realization that she cannot achieve her American Dream either by having sex

with an American or in marriage to Amit. By killing Amit she asserts her inner fury and the disappointments out of being neglected and marginalized in a world dominated by phallic images and male endeavors—and her life had been devoted only to ‘pleasing others, not herself.’<sup>xii</sup>

Dimple’s predicament is not welcoming; it does not speak of any assimilation or acceptable chaos which Mukherjee may feel valid at her critical discourse on ethnicity and culture. Dimple is a maladroit immigrant and her world is a fragile one, a candle in the wind. She suffers from inertia out of several displacements. Her neurotic behavior is an expression of violence with sub-human components of her mirror image.

She is never Americanized, nor is she a thorough Indian. She is a victim of her own clumsy management of her grief. She is like a common Third World immigrant retaining her native components. By creating Dimple’s character Mukherjee probably insists that a passage to America is possible through assimilation and not by ethnic assertion to one’s root. Dimple’s sadistic upsurge reflects her disintegration into insanity. Janet M. Powers consider *Wife* and *Jasmine* as Mukherjee’s ‘sociopolitical critique’<sup>xiii</sup>:

*The multiple codes of Mukherjee’s novels expose both the paradoxical energy and emptiness of American society as well as the antithetical combination of flexibility and adherence to tradition displayed by Indian immigrants to the United States. Through dagger-like observations, Mukherjee’s characters comment on insanity of the lives they lead as Third World peoples adjusting to a fast-paced, mercenary society.*<sup>xiv</sup>

Neither coupled with a distinct culture, nor a hybrid one, Dimple is caged in an insulated isolation of such ‘mercenary society.’ She exists in the ambivalence of an unachieved transition, a middle ground between the fixed, disparate cultural identities of her immigrant community and the hybrid culture of the ideal America. Lacerated and agonized, Dimple has lost everything; she has only her fragmented and dislocated presence. She is neither of India nor of America but a bewildered drifter between these two worlds, not even in search of any identity which she may know herself. Neither does she belong to the TV world nor to the world of reality but keeps on shuttling between the two. She is yet to liberate herself from the world infested with vision. She is yet to get out of her schizophrenic self. A violent wandering nomad, repressed, out of joints and out of ethnic track, she is heading forward to no destination let alone the destination of her self-recovery: ‘The process of integration in *Wife* is the act of finding unity in the discursive indices of violence both within and exterior to Dimple, so that the final act of violence is seen to be isotopic.’<sup>xv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup>Alison B. Carb. ‘An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee,’ *The Massachusetts Review*, Winter 1988, p. 650.

<sup>ii</sup>Maya Manju Sharma. “The Inner World of Bharati Mukherjee: From Expatriate to Immigrant.” *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson, New York: Garland, 1993. p.18.

<sup>iii</sup>Malashri Lal. “Bharati Mukherjee: The ‘Maximalist’ Credo.” *Contemporary Indian English Fiction: An Anthology of Essays*. Ed. K.N. Awasthi, New Delhi: ABS Publications, 1993. pp.57-58.

<sup>iv</sup>Pushpa N.Parekh. "Telling her Tale: Narrative Voice and Gender Roles in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*." *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Emmanuel S.Nelson, New York: Garland, 1993.p.113.

<sup>v</sup>Bharati Mukherjee. (1997)" American Dreamer", *op.cit.* 1–2.

<sup>vi</sup>Uma Parameswaran. "What Price Expatriation?" *The Commonwealth Writer Overseas: Themes of Exile and Expatriation*. Ed. A. Niven, Brussels: M. Didier, 1976 p.41.

<sup>vii</sup>G. Grewal. "Born Again American: Immigrant Consciousness in *Jasmine*." *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Emmanuel S.Nelson, New York: Garland, 1993.p. 181.

<sup>viii</sup>Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. *op.cit.*, p.360.

<sup>ix</sup>*Ibid.*, p.361.

<sup>x</sup>Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2001.pp.54-55.

<sup>xi</sup> *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. *op.cit.*, p.268.

<sup>xii</sup>*Ibid.*, p.212.

<sup>xiii</sup> Janet M. Powers. "Socio Political Critique as Indices and Narrative Codes in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife and Jasmine*" *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson. New York: Garland, 1993. p.90.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89.

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, p.99.