



# Analyzing the Identity and Cultural Crisis of Protagonists in Githa Hariharan's *the Thousand Faces of Night* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

**Dr.D. Ebina Cordelia**

*Assistant Professor of English*

*S.I.V.E.T College, Gowrivakkam, Chennai, Tamil Nadu*



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## Abstract

*This paper examines the identity and cultural crisis experienced by the protagonists in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*, situating their struggles within a cross-cultural and postcolonial framework. Drawing on feminist, psychoanalytic, and cultural studies perspectives, the study explores how cultural displacement, patriarchal constraints, and the erosion of indigenous values shape the protagonists' fragmented sense of self. Both novels portray women caught between tradition and modernity, indigenous culture and alien environments, leading to psychological alienation and existential uncertainty. The protagonists' inner conflicts reflect the broader twentieth-century crisis of identity marked by colonization, migration, and the breakdown of stable cultural norms. By highlighting themes of alienation, cultural dislocation, and the search for selfhood, the paper argues that Hariharan and Mukherjee present identity not as a fixed entity but as a fluid, contested process shaped by social, cultural, and psychological forces. Ultimately, the novels reveal how the assertion of selfhood becomes an act of resistance against cultural homogenization and patriarchal domination.*

**Keywords:** identity crisis, cultural alienation, feminism, postcolonial literature, cross-cultural conflict

## Introduction

Literary interpretations grounded in any culture are fundamentally puzzling to arrive at. The cultural approach to interpreting literature is altogether distinct. Cultural studies typically draw on movements such as Marxism, New Historicism, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis, as well as fields such as Anthropology, Racism, and Postcolonial Studies.

Culture offers much to the distinct fields of human existence. It also stands as a set of

accumulated oppositions regarding its literary and scientific perspectives. Sociology may present it as the institutionalized modes of living of a specific group, whereas literature treats culture as a cluster of diverse values. These values are intended to guide future development, with literature functioning as their autonomous medium.

A cross-cultural condition arises when people from two or more cultural groups come into closer contact. What they bring nearer, along with some other notions, is their willingness in parting with their much sustained totality of heritage, habits,



customs, and artifacts. On the other hand, the same groups would be reluctant to accept others' conventions and customs. Even if these groups predispose, they cannot merge the divergent cultural identities. This chiefly occurs due to the individual's strong indigenous psycho-cultural background, which puts them at the social crossroads. Still, on most occasions, the compulsion to share one's existence overcame such dimensions.

### **Interpretation**

Identity crisis or the search for identity is no longer confined to the individual; it can characterize a group, an institution, a class, a profession, a community, a culture, or even a nation. An individual's sense of identity is neither entirely conscious nor entirely unconscious, although at times it appears to be exclusively one or the other.

Spiritual strain and stress have brought humanity to a state of alienation. Contemporary literature, particularly fiction that deals, manifestly or covertly, with emotional problems, clearly reflects the pathetic condition of the modern man. The complete denigration of the native cultural traditions and values the loss of indigenous language, man's position as a mere outcast or an unaccommodated alien, together with the multiple injuries and lacerations of the psyche—all account for the theme of 'identity crisis' in recent commonwealth literature what affected the native's sensibility most was colonization, stretching over three or four centuries in the erstwhile commonwealth countries.

The existential concept of identity emphasizes the absence of a meaningful set of values and a regular pattern of experience. The state of identity confusion leads to a heightened sense of alienation, immigration, and exile. As orphans, the adopted children suffer a special identity crisis in their strong desire to find out who they are. The people who were born and brought up in alien and mixed surroundings have an identity crisis stemming from their lives.

To refuse to be treated as an object is to affirm oneself as a person, and that is to establish the dignity of personal being in this absurd world. To assert one's identity, however frail it may be, one has

to demonstrate a considerable amount of courage in the face of overwhelming odds. Psychosis, delinquency, psychometric disorder, civic riots, political passivity, protests, and sometimes even suicide are the extreme manifestations of the sense of the loss of one's identity.

Literature, undoubtedly, interprets and records human life in all its diversities and complexities. The twentieth century has faced the dissolution of old convictions and dogmas. As a result, man is caught in the whirlpool of uncertainty, perplexity, and bewilderment never noticed so far. The scientific and technological advancements have no doubt given physical pleasures and comforts to the contemporary man, but all this has been attained at the expense of the inner man.

### **Discussion**

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharan sensitively portrays the condition of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. She diligently captures their split consciousness as a result of which we find, through a set of representative characters, both their submissiveness and their struggle for individuality. Githa Hariharan depicts the cunning patriarchal twin-construct of women's deification and confinement to domesticity. It also examines how, at another level, this dichotomy is addressed by women exercising their choices, adhering to cultural norms.

The novel focuses on Devi, the protagonist, who undergoes a painful process of identity crisis. The story begins with Devi's preparation for her departure from America. The coloured lover she had earlier acquired there, as "an experiment for a young woman eager for experience," is cast aside with dispassionate ease. Devi is from an orthodox Brahmin family and is going to America to pursue an M.A. While returning home, she had to leave behind the memories of Dan, a black American, for a better life in India, which her mother promised she would find. Then, with crammed suitcases, she sets forth on her journey to Madras, to the comforts of her mother's house by the sea.



Daughter of a soft, 'spineless' father and a strong, 'self-willed' mother, Devi views herself as a hesitant, self-doubting person. Her brief sojourn in America is, to her, a dream in which she is no longer the 'weak, dog-paddling Devi', but an invincible individual, a victor, and 'an uncompromising survivor' (TFN, 9). Refusing an offer from her black American friend because of her ambivalence to American culture, she returns to India for the sake of her widowed mother. Once in India, her naked, vulnerable self gets easily sucked in by the stifling cocoon of her mother's love and concern. Placing a forbidding hand on her daughter's American experience, Sita gently but firmly leads Devi to the altar of marriage.

Initially, Devi encounters difficulties adjusting to day-to-day realities and realizes that changing the old order with her radical ideas is difficult, even though she comes from a brave new world. Her dream-like visit to America ends as soon as she is in India. When Dan proposes to her, Devi cannot take the plunge, cannot cut herself off from her ancient moorings, except for a few happy moments in the company of a gentle and caring Black American. The tug of the mother country and of her widowed mother drags her back into the stifling and stultifying world of the upper-class Tamil Brahmin community. If in New York, Devi has found that she is unable to belong to the Black subculture from which Dan comes, in India, she finds herself equally at sea in a culture which supposedly is her own. Her period of study in America was a dream; it has ended, and she is now ready to accept the Indian conventional marriage system. Her studies and stay abroad leave her with experiences and memories that are ill-suited to the life that awaits her on her return to India.

Sita proves that she was not wrong in sending an unmarried girl to America and takes pride in the fact that, like a veteran chess player, she made her moves. Long ago, she chose for herself the traditional role of a good daughter-in-law and wife. To achieve that to perfection, she suppressed the artist within her. Having once chosen her role in life, she never had any qualms. She now prepares Devi for an arranged marriage, and among the many options before them,

they select Mahesh, a regional manager at a multinational company in Bangalore.

At his cross-cultural juncture, the immigrant writer Bharati Mukherjee articulates specific purposes. For instance, she attempts to delineate the life of the immigrant minority community, which adapts to the patterns of the multicultural American life. With this, she seeks to identify a general moral centre in the lives of different communities. Thus, her personal viewpoints on multiculturalism, racism, and other social issues are reflected in her works, particularly in *Wife*. Still, her discomfort with the Western gaze on India and her heritage is justifiable.

Many of the people who went to India looking to escape Western civilization misunderstood and misapplied Indian traditions.... They thought their version of India was the way India really was, without understanding Indian culture. (Carb, 654)

Bharati Mukherjee's second novel, *Wife*, presents Dimple's alienated life in immigration, resulting in neurotic behaviour and her journey from marriage to murder. As a young girl, Dimple Basu seeks a smart, handsome husband who can provide her with everything in life. Dimple's desire for Dimple is clearly indicated in the very first page of the novel:

Dimple wanted a different life—an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for Nylon Saris—so she placed her faith in Neurosurgeons and architects. (*Wife*, 3)

Her marriage was settled with Amit Basu, a consultant engineer. After marriage, Dimple tried to please every member in a traditional Calcutta-based Bengali joint family. When her husband and mother-in-law changed her name, she also accepted her new identity. When she heard that her husband was planning to go to America, she felt that this decision of her husband could provide freedom and liberty. Both husband and wife are excited to fly, but their reason for going to America are totally different. The primary cause of going to America for Dimple was to be liberated from all customs and traditions. She began dreaming about her time abroad without realizing the practical problems she would face there. To fulfil her dream, she aborts her pregnancy, which



may hinder her happy life. She did not want to serve her old mother-in-law. Regarding fantasy, it has been said, "man can continue to enjoy a freedom from the grip of the external world, on which he has long relinquished in actuality" (Freud, 381). Dimple understands that marriage and family are central to Indian life, and to fulfil her dreams, she must continue to conform to her prescribed role. Moreover, she retreats into an entropic state of inertia, exhaustion, and endless indecisiveness.

When she reaches America, she becomes fascinated by everything: the language, culture, society, and even the apartment in which they are living. But in a few days, the cloud of uncertainty and confusion rules her, Mukherjee writes:

She was caught in the crossfire of an American communalism she couldn't understand. She felt she'd come very close to getting killed on her third morning in America. (Carb, 654)

All her dreams are shattered, and she is unable to analyze her own existence. This is the stage of her psychological transformation, and her personality turns into disequilibrium. Dimple faces a cultural encounter between India and America. Now she begins to compare Calcutta and America. Her immature mind is unable to decide which culture to choose. She is acutely aware of American surroundings and the pressures she faces in an alien country. "She is uprooted from her family and her familiar world is projected into a social vacuum where the media becomes her surrogate community, her • global village. New York intensifies her frustration and unhooks her further from reality; she kills easily, like a sleepwalker" (Wife, 76). When Amit is not able to find a job, Dimple becomes disappointed and thinks of different ways to commit suicide. Psychological studies have proved that people with suicidal tendencies suffer from interpersonal crisis, failure, and self-devaluation, inner conflict, and loss of meaning and hope. Dimple's sense of self-esteem has been crushed beyond measure, and she plunges headlong into the depths of despair. Suicide is a delirious mania in which the individual is confused, widely excited, and violent. She tries to learn Western culture, thoughts,

activities, and dress, but fails. After Amit obtains employment, she is left alone all day, and from this point, her dilemma begins. She becomes involved with Milt, and that relationship makes her more violent and guilty. Dimple is a complex character, suffering from schizophrenia, a group of psychotic disorders characterized by withdrawal from society, disorganization, and fragmentation of perception, thought, and emotion.

To analyze Dimple's character, we must not forget her life before marriage. She comes from a middle-class family in which, to secure a good and prosperous husband, a girl must be beautiful. Before marriage, the novelist also clearly indicates her abnormal behaviour. Her complexion, flat breast, and middle-class background are the reasons for her inferiority complex. She was only twenty when she married and was unable to complete her education. Her concept of marriage is totally different.

To escape her role as a traditional wife, she left India. After a frustrating life in Calcutta, Dimple emigrates to the US without realizing that her fundamental problems persist. Once again, she was unable to adapt to America. She has a strong desire to forget Indian culture and tradition, but simultaneously feels inferior in the company of Indian Immigrants. Cultural and racial differences and her failure to speak fluent English cut her off from other Indians. Even she was unable to establish a strong relationship with society. So, she suffers from an identity crisis, and loneliness seems to have depression and suicidal tendencies cloud her thoughts. She fails to assert her individuality in the quest for her authentic self.

Mukherjee has beautifully portrayed Dimple Basu, who is in an identity crisis and self-individualization. She is not able to understand her potential and wishes. Studies indicate that four important wishes arise in our minds: security, new experiences, response, and recognition. She wants them all together without making any positive efforts. Her daydreaming and withdrawal from reality make her life a shell. As a woman, wife, and immigrant, she fails to establish a significant role for herself. Dimple is unable to face the gross reality of



life and cannot discern the way to deal with her psychological problems. This is responsible for the ruination of her 'inner self'. Dimple is caught in a web of a fantastic world that she has created. Her inability to face and fight her psychological problems compels her to act in such a manner.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, the protagonists of these two novels are caught in cultural and identity crises. Devi, who completed her master's degree in America, returned to India with dispassionate ease. She considered herself a modern woman capable of shaping her own life. But once she returned to India, her American ideals of free thinking clashed with her Indian cultural codes. She can no longer be the woman of modernity. Instead, she must adhere to familial customs. She must follow the footsteps of her mother, mother-in-law, and all those mythical role models of perfect womanhood and wifehood. Dimple Basu, who is not highly educated, experiences multicultural exposure—the pulling out of Dimple from one culture and putting her in another created instability and insecurity. Dimple had high expectations regarding

her American freedom, but it was shattered upon her arrival. The reality is too far from her wild dreams of American luxury. Hence, both protagonists, irrespective of their educational qualifications, experience identity and cultural crises. At the cross-cultural juncture, these protagonists, in their early womanhood, are constrained by cultural and conventional codes. Their psycho-cultural attitudes tear them apart from their community and near relationships.

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