

# The Culture Shock in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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## Abstract

*Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian-born American novelist explores the theme of immigration and transformation in her novels. The immigrants have one desire in common that is to settle permanently in America. So, as immigrants they undergo a process of adjustment and transformation of their personalities. Bharati Mukherjee's Wife focuses the status of the immigrant women experience, social oppression, east-west encounter and culture conflict. In the novel the protagonist is trapped between two cultures. It leads her to the tragic life in an entirely alien land. It is not just a novel on immigration and it is difficult to treat the novel as a study of cultural shock.*

**Keywords:** immigration, transformation, culture conflict, east-west encounter, cultural shock.

Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian-born American novelist, Short-Story writer, non-fiction writer and journalist. She takes up the life of the Indian immigrants in the U.S.A as the subject matter of the most of her novels. In her novels, she explores the theme of immigration and transformation. The immigrants have one desire in common that is to settle permanently in America. So, as immigrants they undergo a process of adjustment and transformation of their personalities. She journeys through the different phases such as the phases of expatriation, transition and immigration. Her works reveal her embattlements with ethos, cultures and people of the country where she was born and the land of immigration.

There are conflicts in American immigration, but Bharati Mukherjee Chooses adjustment to merge in America - her Americanization and naturalized citizenship. As an Indian -born girl and a "become-American," Mukherjee depicts her American experience as parallel to her immigrant patterns in her novels. She, in her writings, attempts to allude to the cultural differences and inner self-identity have all been dealt with.

The basic problem of diasporic writings is the feeling of dislocation without roots. The diasporas feel homeless and alienated in the foreign land. Dispersal of roots involves pain, alienation, identity crisis and other feelings to the acculturated ones. The Indo-American diaspora Bharati Mukherjee document the trauma of their protagonists on different contexts. Diasporas migrate to an alien land to live happily, severing their roots of native

country. Mukherjee in her novel by placing central character on different contexts focuses the status of the immigrant women experience, social oppression, east-west encounter and culture conflict.

Mukherjee focuses upon sensitive protagonists who lack stable sense of personal and cultural identity. She is curious about the survival of her protagonist in the new surroundings. She is concerned about making her picture of Indian life intelligible and interesting to the American readers. She makes her characters pass through four important stages, which are significant in the context of immigration. They are rejection, depression, acceptance and reconstruction- rejection of old country and clinging to the past, depression and a lost feeling, acceptance of the new life for oneself and recreate oneself.

Bharati Mukherjee's second novel *Wife* deals with an entirely different problem of expatriates. It is not just a novel on immigration and it is difficult to treat the novel as a study of cultural shock. *Wife* deals with Bengali woman, Dimple Dasgupta, from Calcutta who is preoccupied with America she migrates to America after her marriage with Amit Kumar Basu. Because of the sudden transportation from Calcutta to New York, she is trapped between two cultures. It leads her to the tragic life in an entirely alien culture. Her plight cannot be compared with that of earlier immigrant women since economic necessity forced the latter to enter into relationship, frequently hostile, with the American society and culture around them.

There is an elaborate description of Dimple Das Gupta's passive life in the first part of the novel. She is very much worried about her flat chest. Her father finds Amit Basu, an engineer as son-in-law for him. They marry each other against wishes. Amit wanted to marry a fat and tall woman with fluency in English while Dimple wanted to marry a neurosurgeon. Amit's mother and sister do not welcome her wholeheartedly. Without any protest, she submits to the whims and tantrums of her husband and in-laws. However she thinks that all these problems will come to an end with the confirmation of immigration.

The major cause of going to America for Dimple was to be liberated from all customs and traditions. She started dreaming about her stay abroad without knowing the practical problems she was going to face there. In order to fulfill her dream, she aborted her child that could be an obstacle in her happy life. She did not want to serve her old mother-in-law. Perhaps in recognition of this status and not out of a sense of loyalty, she told herself that she should "learn to please him in new ways" (44).

On the evening of her leaving for the U.S Dimple's friend Pixie invites her to a tea party. There she meets so many people and feels that she is "being introduced to happy life and believes that real happiness is just in the movies or in the west". Thus Mukherjee leaves a note about the protagonist's dreams about the dreamland, the U.S. Amit frees his seven caged birds, and this indicates his anticipation of freedom in the new land.

The description about Dimple and Amit's life at Jyoti and Meena Sen's household in New York is sensibly depicted in the second part of the novel. The two do not stay happily owing to their weak economic condition. She felt happy about the new surroundings. One day Dimple goes to the market with Meena Sen. She asks for cheesecake but the shopkeeper starts staring at her when she repeats the sentence, the shopkeeper ask her whether she does not know the law and searches for something in his drawer. The grief-stricken Dimple thought "she was caught in the crossfire of an American communication. She could not understand. She felt she'd come very close to getting killed on her third morning in America" (60).

Dimple learns soon that violence is an inevitable aspect of life in New York. There were frequent

announcements of murders in newspapers, car radio and in casual conversations. They bring a sort of restlessness and frustration in her. With an increased eccentricity, she starts "beating Amit's back with her fists", one early morning as he was snoring in the bed. She observes a magazine, which says: "Express yourself in your surroundings. Discover your own ground passion and indulge it to excess. Then simplify the rest, throw out, be ruthless. That's the secret of happiness" (87)

In the United States Dimple experiences both her own and borrowed cultures. She believed that she would be "free" to experience a life different and distanced from that which she had left behind in India. She is often reminded of her Indianness which she finds difficult to shed and all her attempts to Americanize fail miserably and Dimple is at sea in her "adopted" culture. The syntax of the passage reinforces Dimple's role as an outsider and a passive object that cannot decide on her own. One finds a dilemma in her to choose to her wish. Jyoti and Amit discuss "guns and licenses" over dinner, and this shocks Dimple "thought she had never really been friends with someone for weeks and discussed important things like love and death. That's what America meant to her" (84-85). She is caught in the crossfire of an America communalism she could not understand.

Dimple's confusion accelerates further compounded when she finds her inability to articulate the language either of the "Americanized Indians" or the Americans. The language was inadequate to express her thoughts and she remains silenced. She is denied expression and is unable either to validate her experience or her identity. So she forsakes the real world and retrieves into a world of her own an imaginary world. For her television becomes a reality and starts to imagine. Dimple's marginalization within her own patriarchal culture and her subsequent encounter with American society leave her confused about her identity.

Rootlessness is the main cause of Dimple's problems that happens due to the lack of acculturation. Her dream turns into neurosis and finally she murders her husband, and justifies it by comparing to T.V serial, "Women on television got away with murder" (213). Most of the diasporas consciously choose to migrate to an alien

country of their choice, with the hope of living there. They migrate to live a happy life, yet in reality they struggle a lot of survival.

Dimple has driven to shock and then to despair. She lives in awaking dream. Her migration has troubled her psyche. She becomes an addict to TV serial. Her transition from being single to marrying a bridegroom chosen by her father, and from living in the familiar surroundings of Calcutta to violent city of New York annoyed her much. Her unstable personality leads to murder her husband. Finally, she ruins her life taking destructive path.

By analyzing this novel, one can understand how the first generation immigrant suffers in an alien country. The novelists have dealt with the events like marriage, love for Calcutta, east-west conflict, and trauma on pregnancy. Dimple prefers to live in her waking dream. Her fantasies

take a violent turn, which take her towards negative side besides the stress on alien culture.

## References

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