



# Emergence of Female Sensibility in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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**Abstract:** A woman is always subordinated to a man in Indian patriarchal social set up that could be traced in long Indian history. In the same way, women characters are traditionally portrayed and coloured as submissive, passive and docile in Indian writings. It is none other than Bharati Mukherjee who presents woman as a subject to resist and to revolt in Indian English writings. She tries to reshape the identity of a woman who dares to rebel and to insurgent. Her subject of a woman includes resistance and wrangle that begins in Indian diasporic writing. Mukherjee's novel *Wife* unfolds many threads of woman-self; as an alienated and lost identity in the novel. This paper tries to deal with the problem of marital adjustment which gives birth to various complexities such as loss of identity and observed behaviour of the women in the modern society. The paper also aims to highlight the issues of women migration; absence of home as if absence of self within, in-between experiencing double marginalization; as an immigrant and as a married woman.

**Key Words:** Woman, Patriarchal, Submissive, Passive, Docile, Insurgent, Immigrant, Revolt, Identity.

Every human being in a society is two things: first an individual and second a person. An individual is a biological entity and, a person on the other hand has an identity which is created or emerges as a result of its relationship to other positions and roles in society. Changes in time and place invariably affect a person's sense of self, how does he or she interact with the world and will challenge his or her personal value system.

In post modern scenario, that has been marginalized is coming on the verges and trying to prove its existence. Females of the whole world have the same deplorable plight and this plight has now-a-days become a genuine way of expression among the writers. Bharti Mukherjee desires to show women characters in her novels endeavouring to demonstrate a strong program from 'Feminine to Female'.

Emergence of 'female sensibility' means to refuse to be treated as an object any more and to affirm the dignity of personal being in this absurd world. To assert one's identity, however frail it may be, one has to demonstrate considerable amount of grit and courage in the face of overwhelming oddities. Mukherjee portrays women's power and the deviousness and the helplessness of women. With the intention of discarding popular myths and beliefs about women, Mukherjee presents those "who aspire to attempt and strive to be their true selves." (Srivastava: 24) In her second novel 'Wife' Mukherjee has attempted to depict a typical Indian woman Dimple; in the role of a wife, thereby delineating the predicament of all such women in the given context.

This paper tries to deal with the problem of marital adjustment which gives birth to various complexities such as loss of identity and observed behaviour of the women in the modern society. This novel is divided into three parts, each dealing with particular phase in Dimple Dasgupta's life. The first one is about her-marital expectations and desires, her subsequent marriage with a mechanical engineer Amit Basu. The second section delineates at the length her expected beginning of a new life in America. The third and final phase describes her total disillusionment of married life and a complete relapse into neurotic psyche and murder of her husband.

The novel begins with Dimple's attainment of age and the beginning of her family's search for a suitable groom. Like so many girls she has been brought up into the world of romantic illusion that marriage promises freedom, love and liberation, and therefore, she waits for a bridegroom to come and woo her. Far from such expectations she takes marriage as the portal of self expression. She lends airy dimensions to a very realistic thing named marriage.

The novel makes a realistic show of a very common practice of displaying a girl as an object before the family of bridegroom. The family members of bridegroom have their own choice of selection or rejection of that object which one is about to be purchased? When Amit Basu's family comes to inspect Dimple, first Mrs. Basu objected to the name "Dimple" which she considered "too frivolous and unbengali" and the candidate's sister Mrs. Ghose felt that the Dimple was "*a little Darker*" than the photograph had suggested (Wife: 15). During the same inspection the girl's parents try to polish the situation and make a hyperbolic description of the meekness of their daughter. They try to show that they have brought up their daughter in such a way that she would perform all the duties that are expected to be performed by her. With the Basus, Mr. Dasgupta (father of Dimple) flattered and pleaded smiling at Dimple, saying:

*"She is sweet and docile; I tell you she will never give a moment's headache"* (15).

After her marriage Dimple has been allotted a new name 'Nandini' which indicates her loss of identity. She is unable to get herself identified with this new name. It is hard for her to get used to a new name. This too is a very common practice of bridegroom's family members that they try to mould the girls according to their own conventions within a few days. They don't pay least attention on such issues as the girls have been brought up in a different family with different modes and customs. They are least bothered about the will of the girl whether she would like to be recognised by a new name.

Here Mukherjee's best effort is to portray a new woman, as a thinking individual, with a mind of her own, who has an urge to assert herself against the numbing effect of conventional ideas of family culture. The demands of the post-marital role fill Dimple with anxieties which include pleasing everybody around her. It becomes her holy duty to please, to win the heart of the new family she has entered into. She also has to agree to everything that her husband commands, because the dictionary meaning of the word husband is 'to govern; to rule'.

The title 'Wife' indicates Dimple's category and the tag through which she is identified in the society. Dimple wants an identity rather than to be known as Amit Basu's wife only. She realizes:

*'How hard it was for her to keep quite and smile though she was falling apart like a very old toy that had been played with, sometimes quite roughly, by children who claimed to love her'* (212).

Amit can choose and make of him what he proposes to be. He experiences and acts and creates his own values by living and choosing. He is fully responsible for his own actions.

Mukherjee delineates Dimple as a disenchanting lonely thinker, searching for ethical significance in smallest of things, struggling for identification with race or class or group. Dimple resents being wife in the Basu family and rebels against wifedom in many ways. She had "picked a skipping rope as her weapon" (41) and adopts abortion as "a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood" (Sharma:15). This act of self-abortion is criticised on the scale that it is obviously an assassination of motherhood which is the consequence of violence smouldering inside Dimple, not her urge of liberation, because pregnancy is a boon for Indian women and they are very source of 'Creation'. A failure to this power of creation is subjected to hatred in society. Despite that, Mukherjee made Dimple a singular character shows her urge of new identity by having courage of abortion her own child. It symbolically represents that by lynching her motherhood Dimple liberates from the traditional role of a Hindu wife of just bearing and rearing a child.

Woman whenever feel hurt inflicts pain on her first and this process can turn them almost psychic and escapist. This happens because for centuries women have been tagged with submissiveness, silence and dependence. Under this camouflage she hesitates to take a decision and makes herself, in many ways however, destructive or worth criticising that may be. But this incident emphasizes the terrible strength which Dimple

possesses submerged inside her, under the apparent docile and domestic personality. Being completely disappointed with this loveless bond of marriage, Dimple begins to pine for something in her life, that she finds out in her immigration with husband. At this point Dimple seems an escapist who is lost in her private world of fantasy.

America, Dimple's land of promises, too falls short before her expectations. Dimple is entrapped in a dilemma of tensions between American culture and society. With the traditional constraints surrounding an Indian wife, between a feminist desire to be assertive and independent and the Indian need to be submissive and self-effacing, the gulf between Amit and Dimple widens. Amit gets engaged in his search for economic security. He does not have the time or the sensitivity to understand the complicated changes going on inside Dimple. With the passage of time the feeling of deception in marriage surrounds her and lets the feeling become stronger that Amit is a good-for-nothing husband. Insomnia becomes her accustomed habit.

By refusing emotional support to Dimple Amit proves the complex of male superiority. She always starves for motivation, and later, due to absolute emotional starvation, she faces complete neurotic breakdown. Dimple feels dead somewhere inside her core of heart and feels irritated even over trifles. Once she exclaims with irritation:

*'I feel sort of dead inside and you can do is read the paper and talk to me about food... you never listen and you have never listened to me. You hate me. Don't deny it; I know you do. You hate me because I'm not fat and fair'* (110).

Although Amit is quite tolerant and considerate in some ways, but he is too self-absorbed and traditional to help his wife achieve selfhood. Husband and wife, obviously in opposite directions in North America, and the gulf between them, just noticeable in Calcutta, widens dramatically in New York.

Dimple's life is a representative of a typical wife's predicament "exploited by housework and afraid of self-expression and about avoiding confrontation..."(149). The dull, monotonous, routine life gets on her nerves more and more. In silence she observes her life falling apart and sadly discovers that Amit remained "a chimera". She also contemplates attacking Amit, since he epitomizes those forces that seemed to trap and isolate her "in a high-rise full of Americans who are hamburgers and pizzas" (119). Ironically, it is the USA that encourages her into designs of avenging herself through destructive means. Finally, in her mentally upset state she kills Amit in act of self-liberation from the stifling, smothering and monotonous life offered to her.

Thus in this novel Dimple is full of feminist overtones and in the end she refuses to be dominated. Though she never tried to dominate she has been aspiring that her husband should communicate with her and should motivate her. Communication gap made them strangers even under the same ceiling. Dimple is a character with feminine sensibility struggling to find modes of authentic communication. She has been unable to give words to those emotions which are essentially incommunicable. Such sort of dilemma is not only of Dimple's but many women suffer from such dilemma in a patriarchal society.

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