

Research Article

Caught Between Two Worlds: The Struggle for Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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Abstract

This paper examines how Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* dramatises the wrenching, often violent process by which an immigrant is forced to remake her sense of self after crossing from one culture to another. Rather than treating identity as something fixed and portable, the paper argues that Mukherjee presents identity as something that must be renegotiated, painfully and incompletely, once the shared world that had confirmed it disappears. Drawing on the novel's central figure, Dimple, a newlywed who leaves India for the United States, the discussion traces how she is squeezed between two rigid cultural scripts: an Indian community that insists she remain simply a wife, and an American world that reduces her to the status of an outsider, no matter how hard she tries to belong. The paper pays particular attention to small, telling scenes, an argument over the taste of chickens, a cheesecake bought from a Jewish delicatessen, a jump-rope miscarriage, and a doomed affair, to show how Dimple keeps trying, and failing, to perform a single, coherent identity rather than live inside her own continuous one. It ultimately reads the novel's violent ending not as an isolated act of madness but as the logical, tragic outcome of a society that never allows its immigrants room to be both before and after at once. In doing so, the paper suggests that *Wife* has as much to say about the limits of American multiculturalism as it does about one woman's unravelling.

Keywords: Identity, Diaspora, Immigration, Cultural Displacement, Multiculturalism

Who am I? It is a question every person eventually asks. However, for someone who has crossed an ocean and left behind a mother tongue, a family structure, and an entire way of seeing the world, the question ceases to be philosophical and becomes a matter of daily survival. In postcolonial societies, questions of identity often take precedence over many other concerns. For

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some, identity is largely inherited through culture, family, and community, while for others, it is something shaped gradually through personal choices, experiences, and individual beliefs. Erikson, writing in the middle of the twentieth century, defined identity as “a subjective sense, as well as an observable quality, of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image” (13). That definition is worth sitting with, because it captures something essential: identity is not simply what a person feels privately about themselves; it also depends on other people recognising and sharing in that same sense of continuity. When an unfamiliar one suddenly replaces the “shared world image” that Erikson describes, as it is for an immigrant, the private sense of sameness can no longer rely on external confirmation, and the self begins to fracture

Identity, in other words, defines a person far more thoroughly than most of us like to admit. Identity influences the relationships we build, the careers we pursue, and many of the choices we make in everyday life. It remains a constant part of who we are, often unnoticed or taken for granted until it is challenged or threatened. A person’s sense of identity is shaped by factors such as race, class, and gender. However, nationality is equally important in determining how individuals understand themselves and their place in the world. In the contemporary world, national identity has arguably come to overshadow many of these other categories, which may explain why the discourse around diaspora, quite literally a scattering, a change of place and habitation, has become so persistent in literary and cultural studies. Diaspora writing keeps circling back to identity as its central preoccupation, because the experience of leaving one’s homeland almost inevitably forces a reckoning with who one is once the old certainties are gone.

Identity crisis and alienation, then, are among the most pressing problems confronting modern people who find themselves in motion, whether that motion is voluntary or forced. The twentieth century, particularly its post-war decades, has often been described as an age of profound spiritual and mental strain, so much so that critics have labelled it “The Age of Alienation.” Edmund Fuller observed that people in this era suffer “not only from war, persecution, famine, and ruin but from inner problems... a conviction of isolation, randomness and meaninglessness in his way of existence” (18). The wounds inflicted by this condition, and the scars they leave on the psyche, force individuals to confront their own helplessness in ways that earlier generations were perhaps spared. For some people, being part of a diaspora, cut off from one’s roots, one’s native culture, and one’s familiar landscape, becomes a significant source of this broader modern malaise. It is no surprise, then, that alienated individuals appear again and again in modern literature. The outsider-as-protagonist is a recurring figure across twentieth-century Indo-English fiction, and Bharati Mukherjee writes squarely within that tradition, using her novels to explore both the pleasures and, more often, the pains of living a diasporic life.

It is worth pausing here to note that diaspora literature rarely offers its characters a clean resolution. The very word ‘diaspora’ carries within it the idea of scattering, of seeds thrown from a single source and taking root, unevenly, in foreign soil. What grows from that scattering is neither wholly the plant that would have grown at home nor something the new soil could have produced on its own; it is a hybrid, often an uneasy one, shaped as much by loss as by adaptation. Literary critics have long observed that immigrant narratives tend to organise themselves around a small set of recurring anxieties: the fear of forgetting one’s own language and customs, the

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humiliation of being misread or mocked in an unfamiliar tongue, the guilt of assimilating too quickly, and the equally sharp guilt of not assimilating quickly enough. Mukherjee's fiction sits squarely inside this tradition, but it refuses the comforting version of the immigrant story in which hardship eventually gives way to belonging. Her characters do not simply arrive, struggle, and settle; they are worn down, reshaped, sometimes broken, by the process of trying to hold two worlds together in a single self.

Mukherjee occupies a distinguished place among Indian women novelists writing in English. She belongs to that particular body of writers who, whether by choice or by circumstance, left their countries of origin and built new homes elsewhere, carrying the experience of departure into nearly everything they wrote. Questions of identity politics run through her fiction from beginning to end. Novels such as *Wife*, *Jasmine*, and *The Holder of the World* explore the changing identities of diasporic women who negotiate their lives across different cultural and geographical spaces. These women move between countries such as the United States, Canada, and India, while also navigating the complex boundaries between the past and the present. Mukherjee's fiction is, at its core, self-actualising: her heroines are almost always caught in the act of defining themselves, searching for an identity that can hold steady even as they are pulled between the competing demands of tradition and modernity.

This paper takes up Mukherjee's novel *Wife* in order to examine how cultural displacement and dislocation, however painful the process, can give rise to new identities. In *Wife*, Mukherjee dramatises the hardships faced by an immigrant navigating a supposedly multicultural society. She sets the novel in the United States precisely so that she can expose both the nation's limitations regarding multiculturalism and the gap between a stated policy of cultural difference and the American dream of individualism and opportunity that the country still likes to advertise about itself. Through the character of Dimple, a young woman who moves from India to the United States after marriage, Mukherjee explores the emotional pain and sense of powerlessness that can arise when an individual is confronted with an unfamiliar social and cultural environment. Her portrayal also questions the limits of American pluralism, suggesting that beneath its celebration of diversity lies a society in which cultural and communal identities can often overshadow an individual's sense of self. The effect, ironically, is to limit the very liberty and success that America's mythology promises to deliver.

From its opening pages, *Wife* stages a kind of sympathetic alienation, one that gradually reveals the near impossibility of genuine multiculturalism. That impossibility finds expression through what might be called an act of definition, often a violent one, that strips away nuance and forecloses real possibility. Mukherjee gives us the story of an immigrant who ultimately does not survive the pressure of being forced to identify with either Indian or American culture, as though no space existed in between. Dimple separates herself from any culture whatsoever, relying instead on what the novel calls "individual initiative," because, as she comes to realise, "that's what it came down to," and her life "had been devoted only to pleasing others, not herself" (212). She pleases others precisely by identifying with a group culture that ignores her personal need to change and adapt in America, one that defines her solely by her role. The Indian community around her sees Dimple as a wife and nothing more. At the same time, multicultural America, for its part, separates her from itself as merely an immigrant, an outsider who does not quite belong. By the end of the novel, Dimple kills her husband, and Mukherjee leaves the reader with a

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disturbing image of her psychological collapse. She begins talking to herself and even to the knife with which she killed him, revealing how completely she has become disconnected from the world around her. Dimple no longer feels fully connected to any particular culture, nor does she succeed in creating a stable hybrid identity for herself. Instead, she remains caught between the rigid cultural expectations of her immigrant community and the promise of an American society that appears to welcome cultural hybridity yet fails to offer her a genuine sense of belonging.

Dimple's Indian community in America reflects this rigid way of thinking, often treating Indian and American culture as separate and opposing choices rather than allowing them to coexist. This becomes clear during an Indian dinner party that Dimple attends with her husband and their hosts. Much of the conversation revolves around comparing Indian and American ways of life, even extending to something as ordinary as the taste and quality of the chicken. One guest insists that Indian chickens, though smaller and thinner, "taste far, far better" (66), and everyone at the table agrees with him. That small, almost comic exchange confirms Dimple's own private impression that, "among themselves, Indians could do no wrong" (63). This compulsive drive to compare starkly separates the two cultures from one another and allows the Indian immigrants at the party to perform their own Indianness, a duality they seem to feel obligated to display, almost as though asserting it loudly enough might settle the question once and for all.

Rather than holding on to a fixed Indian identity, Mukherjee's immigrant characters may also try to adopt an equally fixed American identity. However, this does not necessarily lead to a blending of the two cultures; instead, it often becomes a process of replacing one cultural identity with another. Dimple's early encounters with American life illustrate this tension. For instance, she decides to buy a cheesecake for dessert from a Jewish delicatessen, viewing the act as "a very American thing to do" (58). The scene is small, almost trivial on its surface. However, it captures Dimple's alienation precisely because she is displacing herself, setting aside her own culture in favour of adopting a replacement that she barely understands. Mukherjee ultimately suggests that Americanness, as a cultural identity, is something immigrants cannot really perform, no matter how hard they try, and yet they keep trying anyway. Even before the couple moves to the United States, Amit attempts to acculturate Dimple by taking her out to eat and teaching her to use a knife and fork in the Western style. Later, when Meena Sen admits that trying to understand native English speakers gives her headaches, the admission causes visible embarrassment among everyone present. In that moment, which the novel presents as a sense of "inadequacy," Meena stops trying to perform a particular identity and instead confronts the confusion of being an immigrant struggling to understand a new culture and language at the same time. For these characters, becoming American often involves leaving behind aspects of their Indian identity and adopting an American one in its place. Their experiences therefore reflect the familiar, and sometimes painful, process of assimilation, in which the culture of origin is gradually pushed aside in order to fit into the new society.

Ina Mullick, an Indian immigrant whom the wider Indian community regards as "more American than the Americans" (68), offers her own theory of what she calls the "great moral and physical change" involved in American immigration, a change she describes in terms of "Before" and "After." This framework casts immigrant identity in strictly temporal and exclusive terms, as though a person passes through a single decisive threshold and becomes, irreversibly, someone else. Ina represents the completed "After," while Dimple, by contrast, admits: "I'm always a Before

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... I guess I've never been an After" (95). Dimple's use of the present tense, reinforced by that persistent word 'always,' implies continuity rather than a sequence of discrete stages. Because Dimple insists on her own 'Before' status even while living in America, she unconsciously collapses the spatial barrier that is supposed to separate India from America, and comes to regard her identity as continuous rather than as a series of successive cultural identities, a string of Befores replaced by Afters. According to Ina's logic, though, the immigrant must expel India entirely, must sever the past completely from the present, in order to assume anything like a genuine American identity. Dimple's refusal, conscious or not, to make that clean break is precisely what leaves her suspended. Indeed, her suspension cannot be pinned entirely on migration, since, as Jasbir Jain remarks, "It is difficult to consider the story as a study of culture shock, for even when in Calcutta, Dimple is an escapist and immersed in her inner world of imagination" (15).

That tension, between Ina's demand for a clean break and Dimple's instinct toward continuity, is the very tussle Mukherjee dramatises across the novel. The pressures of multicultural America prevent Dimple from claiming a personal past on her own terms, and instead push her toward maintaining a rigid distinction between India and America, a distinction she increasingly tries to enforce through force and, eventually, through violence. She refuses to welcome the news of her own pregnancy, refuses even to name or acknowledge the child growing inside her, dismissing it only as further evidence of the unfairness built into wifehood and of her own helplessness within that role. For a time, Dimple displaces the rage she feels toward the pregnancy onto external objects, hiding a mouse within the folds of baby clothes that have been bought for a child she has not agreed to want. Eventually, Dimple succeeds in what the text describes as "skipping her way to abortion," jumping rope obsessively until she forces a miscarriage, because the child, she believes, would only serve as a permanent reminder of the past she is trying to outrun. Mukherjee writes that Dimple "did not want to carry any relics from her old life," and the baby, in this logic, would have been exactly that: a relic of the Old World, of the India the couple intends to leave behind entirely. Tellingly, the miscarriage coincides almost exactly with the news that Amit and Dimple will be able to move to the United States. Only once the obstacle most reminiscent of India, a child who cannot yet perform "American" in any way, has been removed can the couple embark on their new life together. However, as her life in America unfolds, Dimple slowly begins to realise the impossibility of the very separation that her society insists she maintain, the separation between past and present, between India and America.

Dimple's affair with Milt works, in this reading, as a kind of extended metaphor for multiculturalism itself, since it seeks to substitute her Indian marriage with an American relationship, one culture supplementing, or replacing, the other, while still preserving the underlying distinction between the two rather than dissolving it. Dimple identifies Milt as the quintessential American, someone with whom she can engage in pleasant, meaningless small talk; as the novel puts it plainly, "He was, to her, America" (175). If Milt stands in for America itself, then Dimple appears to believe that sleeping with him might relieve her distress by allowing her to adopt his culture wholesale while discarding her own, much as she once tried to adopt cheesecake in place of the desserts she grew up with.

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In the end, however, Dimple's killing of Amit does not offer her the freedom or fresh start she might have imagined. Instead, the act leaves her deeply disappointed, as she realises she has been unable to find a place for herself in American society, whether through her relationship with an American man or her marriage to Amit. However, her actions can also be understood as a tragic assertion of individuality. In killing Amit, Dimple breaks away, however violently, from the roles and expectations imposed on her by her cultural past and attempts to assert a self that exists beyond them. "Individual initiative, that is what it came down to," she finally realises, "and her life had been devoted only to pleasing others, not herself" (212). Mukherjee acknowledges that Dimple's entire experience of immigration amounts to a kind of "misguided Americanization," yet by the novel's close, Dimple has transformed, not into an Indian living in America, and not into an American either, but into something else entirely: an American with an Indian past, a hybrid identity achieved at devastating cost. Brinda Bose's comment in her perceptive essay "A Question of Identity: Where Gender, Race and America Meet in Bharati Mukherjee" is significantly to the point: "Dimple is helplessly caught in the gripping quest for a new female American identity," for her "a happy guiltless amalgamation seems impossible," and what goes on inside her is therefore a "simultaneous fracturing and evolving of identity" (47).

Migration, in the end, is a genuinely painful process, one that inevitably causes some measure of psychological detraction, however necessary or even desired the move might have seemed at the outset. No amount of talk about multiculturalism, no policy statement or official rhetoric, has proven able to spare diasporic subjects the difficult work of figuring out, largely on their own, how to transcend the liminal space they occupy, a task that bears directly on their long-term well-being. Still, with a clearer understanding of what it means to be, in some fundamental sense, homeless, the nations that receive immigrants can also develop better means of helping diasporic subjects cope. The immigrant experience remains genuinely complicated: a sensitive immigrant finds herself perpetually stationed at a kind of transit point, caught between memories of an original home and the pressing realities of an unfamiliar new world. Bharati Mukherjee, throughout *Wife*, masterfully explores this complexity: the foreignness, the clash of lifestyles, the cultural disorientation, the conflicts inherent in assimilation, and the tangled ties that bind one generation to the next. In doing so, she paints a portrait of an Indian family caught between the pull of inherited tradition and the promise, not always kept, of the American way of life.

What makes *Wife* such a compelling case study in identity is precisely its refusal to offer Dimple, or the reader, an easy way out. Mukherjee does not allow her protagonist the comfort of a stable hyphenated identity, the kind of "Indian-American" label that might, in a gentler novel, have arrived as a hard-won resolution. Instead, Dimple's story insists that the process of becoming someone new after emigration is neither linear nor guaranteed to end well. The novel's violence, both the quiet violence of Dimple's miscarriage and the explicit violence of Amit's murder, functions as a kind of narrative shorthand for the violence already embedded in the demand that an immigrant choose a single, fixed identity in the first place. Read this way, Dimple is less a case of individual pathology than a symptom of a larger cultural failure, the failure of a host society to imagine belonging as something other than an either/or proposition. Not every critic accepts this sympathetic reading, however. R. K. Dhawan argues that "Dimple has been portrayed free and rebelling throughout the novel. She has no inhibition in expressing whatever she feels. On the contrary, it is Amit Vasu who is a victim in India as also in New York. His murder

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signifies how an innocent, duty-conscious husband falls a prey to the neurotic madness of his wife" (81). Set against Dhawan's emphasis on Amit's victimhood, the reading offered here places the burden of Dimple's violence on the cultural scripts that surround her rather than on her temperament alone.

That failure, of course, is not unique to the America that Mukherjee depicts in the 1970s; it recurs, in different forms, in nearly every society that receives large numbers of immigrants without fully reckoning with what integration actually requires. Dimple's tragedy, then, speaks beyond her own particular circumstances. She stands in for every diasporic subject asked to perform an identity rather than simply live one, and her disintegration into silence and violence at the novel's close reads as an indictment less of Dimple herself than of the impossible bargain she was asked to strike. Mukherjee's genius lies in showing us this bargain from the inside, in prose that never lets the reader retreat into easy judgment of her heroine. By the final page, we are left not with a villain or a victim in any simple sense, but with a woman who tried, in the only way left available to her, to reclaim a self that multiple cultures had spent the whole novel trying to define on her behalf.

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