Cultural Disjunction in B. Mukherjee’s *Wife*

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After experiencing racism in Canada, where multiculturalism emphasized ethnic differences and fixed identities rather than allowing for cultural interaction and hybridity, the author, B. Mukherjee, moves to the USA whose biculturalism favors cultural interactions and fluid identities. Here she experiences the transformative powers of cultural interactions and frees herself and her work from the static power of cultural disjunction. Her personal experience highlights the need of immigrant characters to connect to the mainstream and not to be isolated from it.

The paper explores the problem of cultural adaptability and integration as experienced by Dimple, the main character in Mukherjee’s novel *Wife* (1975). Based upon contemporary research on cultural and social identity formation, the paper analyses Dimple’s inner struggle of identity in the context of her immigrant status, and it relates her ultimately tragic response to loneliness and alienation resulting in cultural disjunction, non-adaptability, and non-assimilation.

*Keywords:* enculturation/acculturation, multiculturalism/biculturalism, cultural disjunction/cultural interaction, static/transformative, dialogic confrontation/hybridity

**Introduction**

**Immigrant Identity Formation-Theoretical Framework**

“Only connect! … Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no more. … Only connect, and… the isolation that is life… will die” (Forster, 1992, Chapter 22, emphasis added). The author will use Forster’s epigraph to his novel *Howards End* (1992) as a catchphrase in Bharati Mukherjee’s analysis of *Wife* (1975); the catchphrase is meant to attract attention to the power of enculturation and acculturation as bicultural constructs in immigrant identity formation.

B. Mukherjee’s personal experience highlights this need of immigrant characters to *connect* to the mainstream and not to remain isolated from it. Unlike other postcolonial writers, her own struggle with cultural identity and immigrant status is presented as a gain and not as a loss. Her fiction is a mirror of the good and bad cultural experiences, first as an exile from India, then as an Indian expatriate in Canada, and finally as an immigrant in USA (Alam, 1996, emphasis added). Characters constantly interact in and disjoin cultural and social “space” in an effort to show the positive effects of immigration.

B. Mukherjee entitled herself an Asian American writer, refusing hyphenation. After experiencing racism in Canada, which did not allow for cultural fusion and where she felt marginalized and alienated, she rebuilt a new...
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transformative self in America where she found her new home.

According to Mohanram, cultural identity within American scenery is constructed via difference rather than sameness. He argues that identity is first and foremost psychological: “We begin to construct our identity only when we perceive *difference*, or when we perceive our identity to have been eroded or eluded in some way. Pure or essential identity does not exist because we begin to construct identity only when the process of erosion has begun, when ‘pure’ identity has already been adulterated in some way” (Mohanram, 2000, p. 4, emphasis added). Indians are for instance perceived as different by cultural markers (skin color, accent, saris, jewels, behavior, customs, etc.) that highlight difference (linguistic, racial, behavioral, etc.) from other ethnic groups or from the white majority.

According to Ilie (as cited in Marin, 2007, p. 27), academics examining postcolonial intellectuals in exile contend that immigrants go through a process of deculturalization or loss of cultural identity. Leaving a culture that is well defined historically and geographically makes re-assimilation difficult.

The issue of reincarnation and rebuilding of selves is possible in Mukherjee’s view through perceiving cultural difference (biculturalism) and not through cultural diversity (multiculturalism). To accept diasporic identity is to accept both places, to be bicultural, which minimizes the negative effects of dislocation and expatriation.

The American female writer B. Mukherjee sees salvation only as a fusion of cultural opposites. A dialogic cultural encounter and conflict starts between the native Indian culture she belonged to and the new American culture; it is a conflict in terms of language, physical appearance, attitude, behavior patterns, customs, and beliefs which does not result in merging or mixing. It is a two-way transformation in which a new hybrid (both enculturated and acculturated) culture emerges in which each culture retains its own unity, while both are mutually enriched.

Hybridization reorganizes social spaces structurally and culturally. Homi Bhabha discloses the status of contemporary culture that in the process of negotiating power and identity, revealing ambiguity, displacement and disjunction, is in a “middle passage”, a site of “newness”, of displacement and disjunction that transcends fixed identifications and “opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an imposed hierarchy” (as cited in Page, 1999, p. 5). As opposed to the reliance on the fixity and stereotypes of colonial discourse, postcolonial discourse for Bhabha creates access to time and space outside the linear and the ordinary: “We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion…”. This “interstitial perspective” allows us to “simultaneously return to the present”, “renew the past”, and “touch the future on its hither side” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 5).

Mukherjee distinguishes between biculturalism, which favors cultural interaction (the case of America) and multiculturalism, which favors cultural disjunction (the case of Canada). While biculturalism implies change by fusion of cultures, multiculturalism favors separation of cultures and fixed identities, suppresses the individual, and highlights ethnicity. This ethnicity favors cultural inheritance (the immigrant’s identification only with her past culture), which results in marginalization, isolation, and alienation. Deleting the past, on the other hand, triggers along failure and alienation as well. No cultural hybridization is encouraged, the immigrant having to choose between the native ethnic and the new American culture. Stereotyping is strongly propagated as well as idealized images of that ethnic group, which, if not intensify, at least maintain difference.
Diasporic identities in the view of cultural theorists like Stuart Hall are thought not as an already accomplished fact, transcending history, place, time, and culture; instead, it is viewed as a continuous process and always constituted within. Hall regards cultural identity “as a matter of becoming as well as of being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past” (as cited in Dempsey, 2010, p. 34, emphasis added).

Cultural interactions are transformative, while cultural disjunctions are static. If the two cultures are stereotypically fixed in time and space, change cannot take place in the present. Multiculturalism favors “being” which implies static and suppressed identities; neither culture intends “to open up”; they both remain fixed with no possible negotiation. On the other hand, biculturalism favors “becoming”, encouraging individual, non-stereotyped individualities.

**Wife—Cultural Displacement, Disjunction and Alienation**

In *Wife*, which, according to Alam’s categorization (Alam, 1996, p. 7), belongs to the second stage of creation, when she faced Canadian racism, Mukherjee writes about a woman named Dimple Dasgupta, who is the classic example of an Indian woman in exile who fails in her psychological transformation to achieve a new life in America; she cannot bridge the gap between conventional and nonconventional, between enculturation and acculturation. Although suppressed by patriarchal norms, she attempts to be an ideal Bengali wife. She marries a young engineer, Amit Basu, and moves to America. Her attempts to become American—to learn to speak American English by watching television, for example—cause her to question her own cultural values, and even her own happiness. These are questions she might have never asked herself back in her hometown Calcutta. Still, despite her efforts, she cannot adjust to her new life.

“The disjunction between the life Dimple leads and that which America seems to promise her on television” (Sushma, 2007, p. 48) deepens the gap between reality and imagination. She finds her husband responsible for her unhappiness although she stubbornly imagines she is a happy person like the soap operas characters. She cannot sleep at night, thinking of the mistake she has made marrying a man who has no job and hence could not offer her the glamorous life she sees on TV.

She can perform but one fixed identity. She can be either Indian or American. This lack of cultural fusion is visible in the choice of her name as well. Dimple is defined by *Oxford English Dictionary* as “any slight surface depression” (Oxford Dictionary Online, n.d.)¹, while her family name, Dasgupta, a combination of “das” (servant) and “gupta” (protected), reduces her to the same traditional role of a submissive Indian wife.

Acculturation becomes impossible for immigrants like Dimple. She cannot adopt the behavior patterns of the surrounding American culture. Neither can she bridge the two cultures, Indian and American. Americanness is a cultural identity she cannot perform; for instance, when Amit takes his wife Dimple out to dinner, she loathes eating with a knife and a fork, preferring “to eat with her fingers, Bengali-style, in a restaurant” (Mukherjee, 1975, p. 22).

Cultural differences and disjunctions can be expressed through language, clothes, behavior, symbolism, etc.. One important cause of this cultural disjunction can be the lack of an understandable language. Like other immigrant writers, Mukherjee cannot cut all the links with her past. Language is a medium of expression to connect her to her Indian heritage and also is a tool to empower women. Although the characters from her early novels (describing her sad experience in Canada) apparently enjoy a sense of liberation (they travel physically),

they are in fact lonely, confused, and statically conventional.

Dimple is such a case, conveying this sense of loss and dependence on others’ powers: She studies hard for her BA exam while waiting to be married to a suitable groom for “without a BA she would never get a decent husband” (Mukherjee, as cited in Scott, 1996, p. 296). Mukherjee describes Dimple as an isolated woman, because she does not speak much English:

By the time I started writing *Wife*, I’d become more North Americanized and that change comes through in the writing. I am not at all an autobiographical writer, but my obsessions reveal themselves in metaphor and language. When I was writing *Wife*, a limited third-person point of view seemed more natural and comfortable than an omniscient one. I was totally engrossed in Dimple. I knew I wanted to stay close to Dimple—an immigrant wife who starts to question her traditional values—and show the immigrants’ world through her. And since I was telling the story of the traumatic changes—cultural, psychological—through Dimple, the language, too, was Dimple’s; it was more intense, less authoritative, and stately than in *The Tiger’s Daughter*. (Mukherjee, as cited in Mukherjee, & Edwards, 2009, p. 16)

Meena Sen, Dimple’s Indian friend, is also a static and stereotypical character who admits she has headaches when trying to understand native English speakers. Panna’s Indian husband, Amit, also admits he does not understand the language spoken in New York. Such cases become part of an insular community: What they can perform is only their Indian parts, e.g., Dimple trying to buy a cheesecake in a butcher’s store, which made her run “from the store eyes closed, hands covering her mouth and nostrils” (Mukherjee, 1975, p. 60). They keep on totally relying on their past which provides them with security in a foreign land. The same applies to Ina Mulick, a friend of Dimple’s, despite being in America for such a long time. She sticks to the same continuous and static identity and does not dare to change it for a fluid and dynamic identity. “I’m always a Before”, she seems to be telling us all the time. Once she removes the Indian past in order to anchor into the American present, she cannot remember it anymore. The more she tries to retrieve it the more comparisons she makes between the two cultures instead of trying to achieve a beneficial cultural fusion between the two.

Likewise, Dimple cannot adjust her Indian cultural heritage to the newly acquired American culture. She stubbornly distinguishes between India and America, often through unfeminine means such as force or violence. Before going to America, Dimple finds out she is pregnant. She uses all verbal and physical force to reveal her non-acceptance of performing her duty as a wife and future mother. “She did not want to carry any relics from her old life” (Mukherjee, 1975, p. 43), not even a baby; she jumps rope until she forces a miscarriage. A child is a reminder of her Indian past and the traditional role of motherhood, on the one hand; on the other hand, the child could hybridize the two cultures, being born of immigrant parents.

The disjunction between expectation and reality created by cultural displacement can become too wide ending up in alienation. Dimple is such a case: She is in an arranged marriage with Amit whom she hardly knows, is taken away from the only home she has ever known, and is thrown into New York, the most multicultural American city.

Full of frustrations, she puts her faith in the New World and would like a total change in her life. As soon as Dimple and Amit have settled in their new homeland, America, it becomes clear that Dimple is the victim of double marginalization: First, as a recent immigrant to USA, she finds it hard to adjust to American culture; second, as the wife of an Indian man, she is expected to respect Indian marital conventions, which confine her to a life within the four walls of a cramped flat.
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She has to choose between preserving her cultural identity with no possibility of personal development or giving up her Indian cultural identity and enjoying her newly acquired American freedom. She refuses and is refused cultural interaction. Day after day, she is sitting in the flat with nothing to do and nowhere to go. Traditional Dimple is kept isolated in this flat so it is only normal that she is fascinated by Ina Mulick’s independence. When she is invited to a pizza by Ina and is suggested to wear American clothes of a collection, Dimple refuses her with an awkward, “I’m sorry”. She also feels uncomfortable when eating chicken pieces with fork and knife at her husband’s invitation to dinner.

Despite her background of a Bengali college educated girl, the essential problem is lack and insufficiency of communication, hence her impossibility to act as a negotiator and linker of cultures. Significantly, her problem does not lie outside her, but within her. She would remain a foreigner wherever she might go: “Her isolation is rooted not merely in loneliness, in isolation, or cultural differences, but in her estrangement from her own past and her own inner being” (Jain, as cited in Sushma, 2007, p. 45).

The present and the past do not interact in Dimple’s life. Her problems with adaptation are not due to a cultural shock, as her husband thinks, but far more deeply, in her psyche. Marriage itself, along with cocktail parties and love, although so longed for, would not free her or fill her with passion, as she lacks “the wealth and inclination for higher life and passion” (Sushma, 2007, p. 45).

She is unable to move beyond the past, despite her willingness to engage in the present; she cannot anchor her new life starting from a “usable” past. She cannot use racist discrimination experienced in a Queens shop, gender discrimination at home, and class discrimination at meetings with white feminists as tools to empower herself (Chen & Goudie, 1997)². She remains isolated from beginning to the end, because she does not interact directly with people, neither does she speak much English, although she tells herself that she is learning American English and is getting to know Americans from TV programs and soap operas. She soon realizes she can fit into neither culture. She ends in depression, madness, and eventually murder. A weak personality type, she becomes alienated from both worlds, and “falls into a state of immigrant’s psychosis, unable to distinguish between nostalgia and reality, between longing and suffering” (Verhoeven, 1996, p. 1). Dimple’s confinement to Queens’ Indian community, not being allowed by her husband to work, her preference for watching TV, her futile efforts to make friends with children, all contribute to her distorted sense of reality. The result is cultural disjunction, no communication, fear to leave her flat, sleeping all day and suffering from insomnia at night.

She thought marriage would bring her love and freedom. When she confronts the reality of her married life, she fights against depression by reading English magazines to improve her English. Once she reads a letter from a female reader who supports the idea of arranged marriages and opposes divorce: “Are you forgetting the unforgettable Sita of legends? … Let us carry the torch of Sita’s docility” (Mukherjee, 1975, p. 28).

Her psychic disease deepens and she starts dreaming of catching fatal diseases like Leukemia. Causes are multiple, the media and New York adding to her frustrations. The more estranged she becomes from reality, the more neurotic she becomes. First she wants to become “Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legend” (Mukherjee, 1975, p. 6). Soon, although an Indian by birth and education, she cannot fulfill this docile and submissive role anymore.

Then she starts using violence. She “horribly misshapes a pregnant mouse” (Mukherjee, 1975, p. 36). She

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² Retrieved from http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v1i1/BHARAT.HTM.
has an impulse to flush a gifted pet goldfish down the toilet bowl” (Mukherjee, 1975, p. 40).

Her neurosis makes her envision men with broken teeth and dirty fingers “who dug into her body in a dark suburban garage” (Mukherjee, 1975, p. 34) and has strange visions of her unborn baby with “wrinkled skin like a very old man’s and a large head filled with water” (Mukherjee, 1975, p. 43). The criminal and violent thoughts culminate with the killing of her “tyrannical” fetus she was carrying by means of a skipping rope.

The gap between reality and fantasy widens. Her behavior becomes schizophrenic when she compares her favorite show on TV, “The Guiding Light” with the “shows” of her “friends” (Indian and American alike) who speak exclusively about violence and death. She fancies at night ways to kill herself, and later ways to kill her husband. TV becomes the voice of her consciousness. Although she becomes aware of her addiction to the TV “voice of madness” (Mukherjee, 1975, p. 176), she acts “like a character in a TV series” (Mukherjee, 1975, p. 195), comparing herself to a soap opera wife.

From the sleep walking stage, feeded also by the violence propagated by her friends and the mass media, to the fulfillment of her criminal plan, there is a small step. After having a quite innocent illicit relationship with Milt Glasser whom she likes, because he builds up a bit of confidence in her, she kills her husband by stabbing him seven times, “in apparent repudiation of the Hindu marriage bond signified by the seven ritual steps taken by the couple at the time of marriage” (Leong, as cited in Sushma, 2007, p. 55). “The TV screen and Dimple’s private screen merge in the novel’s final sentence: ‘Women on television got away with murder’” (D’Souza, as cited in Piciucco, 2004, p. 184).

Linda Sandler considers the novel as the story of a woman who is trapped between two cultures, and who aspires to a third, imagined world offered by the media (as cited in Sushma, 2007, p. 54). In any traditional society, women are usually considered as caretakers and preservers of culture and tradition. When they are exposed to a radically different set of cultural values, they experience a cultural shock, which, in turn, produces a sense of alienation that prompts them to explore ways to reconcile with their shifting and evolving identities.

Wife is Bharati Mukherjee’s first portrayal of “America as a whole, a culture defined by a crippling multiculturalism that emphasizes ethnic difference and permits segregation, thereby preventing hybridity” (Rang, 2010, p. 11). The enforced difference and isolation of the Indian community in Wife ultimately destroys Dimple. Wife is the sad story of an immigrant woman who fails to achieve a new life. However, it is the first major work of Bharati Mukherjee to explore differently what it means to be a minority in an alien culture and to become an American.

Conclusions: A New Life

Frustrated at Canada’s policy of multiculturalism with its emphasis on cultural diversity and subsequent cultural marginalization and isolation, Bharati Mukherjee finds her roots and emotions as an American writer in USA. It was an instant kind of love, as she confessed in Bill Moyers’ televised interview (Moyers, 1990). She started believing in empowerment through cultural assimilation. Her later works show this increasing optimism at the possibility of successful integration, as her characters learn how to survive after traumas of self-transformation, both in appearance and mind, on their way towards Americanization. Dimple is nothing but

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the “wife” of a boiler maintenance engineer in the same way as Mukherjee in multicultural Canada was no more than the “wife” of a Canadian writer. But, if Mukherjee and her female characters are timid, submissive, and passive in the second stage of creation, they will evolve in the third stage of creation—when Mukherjee fulfills the role of an accomplished immigrant to USA—when they become independent, assertive, and dynamic, fighting for their right to get out of their conventional roles. This is the case of Panna Bhatt, the female character of a later short story written by Mukherjee, entitled “A Wife’s Story” (1988). Mukherjee now writes as a successful and independent mainstream American writer who entitles herself, “I am an American, not an Asian-American”. Fully re-assimilated, Mukherjee does not feel the cultural oppression anymore. She is an immigrant in a country of immigrants. Her way towards “Americanization” is given voice by her female characters. Her successful character from “A Wife’s Story” (1988), Panna, experiences profound liberation (physically and mentally), which results in cultural interaction and hence positive cultural assimilation unlike Dimple from *Wife* whose role is to act only as a conventional Hindu submissive wife (only physically liberated); her response to loneliness and alienation results in cultural disjunction, non-adaptability, and non-assimilation.

To give an interpretation to Forster’s words that fits this research, the author would say that cultural interactions are transformative (as in Panna’s case), while cultural disjunctions are static (as in Dimple’s case). The power to connect enculturation and acculturation and to interact culturally is what leads to fluid identities. Diasporic identity can be rebuilt by bridging native and adopted cultures. Unlike the fixity of the classical (post)colonial discourse, for Mukherjee cultural assimilation is empowerment. Biculturalism (old/native and new/adopted culture) and hybrid cultures (see America’s case) that entertain difference and not sameness, without necessarily imposing hierarchies (mainstream or minority) can transform, in Mukhejee’s view, immigration into a gain with positive effects and not into the stereotypical postcolonial lament.

**References**


