



TRACING THE SENSE AND SENSIBILITY OF AN INDIAN IMMIGRANT IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S NOVEL *WIFE*

Dr.K.Thiyagarajan

Professor & Head

Sir Theagaraya College, Chennai

Associate

Department of English

Tamilnadu-21

Abstract

*In the recent past, scholarly interest has augmented simultaneously with the surge of fictional writings. On the one hand, feminist scholars inclined to disassociate themselves from the domestic domain as they equated it with women's confinement, and on the other a faction within the group recognized its contribution towards shaping women's subjectivity. Presently, therefore, the domestic world encompassing all it is having a deeper significance in culture and as a means for women to exercise their individuality. The domain of the kitchen is now recognized with all its subversive capacity and it is considered a pivotal part of subjectivity formation. Food images in contemporary women's fiction interrogate and problematize that subjectivity. This paper proposes to analyse the culinary images found in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975). She also portrays kitchen as a center where the issues like gender, identity, race and modernity are discussed through the diasporic lens.*

Keywords: *Confinement, Women's Subjectivity, Culture, Individuality, Identity Crisis*

The novel *Wife* is about the protagonist Dimple Dasgupta and her inner world, which is depicted by her interaction with food and her body image. We observe that through these images Mukherjee successfully presents the kitchen as the space in which the interplay between gender, race, tradition and modernity takes place in the diasporic context. Furthermore, instead of upholding the domain of the kitchen as an empowering agency for immigrant women, Mukherjee presents it as a constricting space. However, at the same time, she foregrounds the kitchen with all its subversive possibilities as a buffer against cultural homogenization of the diasporic subjects. We contend that Mukherjee has an equivocal stance on cookery where she neither completely upholds nor entirely denounces it; nonetheless, she establishes the relation between food and subjectivity. It is noteworthy that in addition to food images,

Mukherjee has interpellated her work with images of decay and violence to represent incoherence and decadence in the lives of her characters before and after immigration.

Wife is Mukherjee's second novel, and it came in response to a question she asked herself, "What do Bengali girls do between the age of eighteen and twenty-one?" (Mukherjee Days, 212). It was largely decried by the critics in India for its alleged negative portrayal of India and unconventional depiction of the female protagonist. *Wife* is a generic title; it refers to Dimple Basu, wife of Amit Basu, a mechanical engineer. The story is about Dimple's marriage and the subsequent immigration to America with her husband. According to Anita Myles, the title of the novel is ironical for the protagonist is "incapable of fulfilling this role in the traditional manner, as the demands are more than she can handle, and develops a mental disposition which leads to failure in marriage" (311).

Dimple in *Wife* is trained in cookery as any average middle class Bengali girl of her time. Cookery, though arbitrated by bourgeois utilitarian ideology, is the only acceptable expression of creativity presented to her. Dimple markets her culinary skills in America and is appreciated by her acquaintances, so much so that her personality is recognized by her culinary endeavours wherein she showcases American food before her Bengali guests and highlights her Bengali cookery in the presence of American guests. Eventually, her neurosis and sense of alienation accentuate in America, and she loses interest in eating, even though she cooks regularly to present a semblance of 'normalcy' in the presence of her husband and other people. But even in her mentally unstable condition, she experiences, albeit partially, the recuperative quality of the kitchen. Dimple is an incipient feminist and lacks the mental and intellectual ability to fully comprehend the ideology and to implement it.

According to Mukherjee, Dimple learns to "ask herself 'self'- oriented questions. Am I happy? Am I unhappy?". Consequently, this indicates her interest in the evolution of her identity and makes her a nebulous feminist. But because she lacks the capability to comprehend her own self and understand the larger aim of her life, she fails to evolve. Thus, she is caught between her desires and reality, between east and west, her imagined and real self. Her sense of identity and self hood do not develop as she loses track of reality. Dimple's violent outburst are symptomatic of the sudden changes in the locale and culture in immigrant's lives.

At the onset of the novel, we are told about Dimple's ennui with her life as she waits for her marriage to be arranged with a neurosurgeon. As not potential groom shows any interest in her, she is convinced it is because of her physical appearance. Thus, body becomes the locus of her dissatisfaction. Her preoccupation with her physical assets results in her consuming food with medicinal values that would enhance her beauty—mustard oil massage, ground almond, honey packs, chicken soup etc. In her woeful missive to Miss Problem wala in a women's magazine, she narrates her problem very vocally and cries out in desperation. Her frank objectification of her own body is not surprising, considering the prevalence and internalizing of the beauty myth in the phallocentric world as explained in an excellent

study by Naomi Wolf. Dimple treats herself as a consumable object. She too, like Marian in Atwood's *Edible Woman* (1969), becomes 'edible'.

We are told that a substantial quantity of fish bought for the wedding feast is stale and has to be thrown away. "From the window of the bathroom on the wedding morning, Dimple saw crows and pariah dogs work through the rotten fish that had been thrown in an open dump in the alley behind the house" (16). This image of dirt and decay forebodes the future of this marriage. With irony befitting the situation, Mukherjee inserts, "It was a perfect wedding" (16). The images of filth and decay which are presented before the wedding succeed in prophesying Dimple's future, in which her life centers on decadence.

In the initial stages of her married life, she gives up eating her favorite green chillies, but she resumes eating them when she suspects she is pregnant. She hopes green chillies would make her body "return to its normal cycle" (30). She tries all she can, to get rid of her pregnancy. She induces vomiting whenever she can, as she enjoys the sensation:

She would sneak off to the bathroom and crouch in front of the toilet bowl with both elbows on the rim and watch the arc of foul vomit crash against the sides. The vomit fascinated her. It was hers; she was locked in the bathroom expelling brownish liquid from her body. She took pride in the brownish blossoms, in the solid debris of chewed cauliflowers and lentils that snak fast; she grew arrogant and possessive, resenting the flush that carried them away to some sea (30-31).

In her life as an Indian immigrant 'housewife' in America, she is overcome by loneliness. It is reflected in her erratic eating habits. She lets rotten food accumulate in the kitchen, "There was grease ring two inches from the bottom and large turmeric stains around the drain. Two coffee mugs, a plate with congealed egg yolk and partly chewed bacon strips and a skillet with waxy bacon drippings cluttered the counter top" (117). Even her leftovers make her depressed and remind her of her failure in the process of Americanization, "The stale curry smelled offensively of garlic. It made her feel trapped, isolated in a high-rise full of Americans who ate hamburgers and pizzas. She thought she might have been a better person, a better wife at any rate, if she could have produced more glamorous leftovers" (119). She craves for a whole new range of cuisine which could confirm her into the mainstream culture of America.

Throughout the novel Dimple manifests, what may be called a love-hate relationship with alien food. Paul Rozen explains the development of food preferences, where the food from the 'others' is considered undesirable and attractive at the same time. He observes a paradoxical tendency in human food behavior: the fear of new food which is called 'neophobia' (286). The link between neophobia and neophilia is showcased through the tropology of beef. Beef in India has always been the cause of contention between communities, as its consumption becomes the marker of non-Hindu peoples and

cultures. For an average Hindu eating beef is blasphemous because the cow is considered holy. Beef signifies the classic ‘other’ who is lowly and impure and even capable of polluting through minimal contact.

One day at an Ina’s party, Dimple is shocked by beef eating Hindus and is revolted at the idea of consuming beef. At night she could not sleep because of the psychological impact this incident has on her-she feels that she has the taste of beef in her mouth. Beef symbolizes the inexplicable fear of the unknown. The immigrants suffer from a lurking fear of ‘others’ contaminating them and proscribed food is one of the easiest ways of contamination possible. This explains Meena’s reluctance to invite the ‘sahibs’ over to her home. The eating mores of the American world will render Meena impure to return home. Meena also explains that American men mug women because beef makes them “crazy” (70). Thus, beef becomes the site of difference; beef per se becomes an impassable gulf between cultures. And so Dimple’s act of tasting beef is indicative of her apparent fear and latent desire to become the ‘other’.

Actually, the character Dimple is fascinated by the American kitchen because of its materialistic manifestations like white sugar, cake mixes and ultra modern kitchen appliances. Her excitement with food in America seems to convey that for her America, with all its bounty, is a consumable entity. It is only befitting that her very first disappointment with America is depicted in a food store. Dimple enters a meat shop and asks for some cheese cake. She is shocked when the Jewish shopkeeper shouts at her for expecting him to break his God’s law. Cheese cake becomes the site embodying the cultural differences present in America and India. Dimple could not understand the Jewish dietary laws and perceives this incident as a racist attack. She later resents the incident as being the main deterrent to her growth in America. She is sure that only if the cheesecake man had not “trapped” her, she would have had the courage to venture out of her house all by herself and would have been “strong and sane” (115).

Eventually the kitchen appliances and magical mixes lose their appeal for her, and she feels too incompetent to handle American machines, “She was a pitiful immigrant among demanding appliances” (186). The American kitchen which seemed like a promising space with creative possibilities, stifles her eventually and she could not extract the full potential of her kitchen as a restorative site because of her neurosis. Unlike the protagonist in *Jasmine* (1989) who creates a new kind of menu by interspersing the food of the east with that of the west, Dimple is creatively challenged and meticulously follows instructions given to her on TV or taught to her by others. She slavishly follows instead of leading, be it cooking or shopping for food. She confesses to her Americanised Bengali friend Ina, “I can’t keep up with the people. I haven’t read the same kinds of books or anything... I just like to cook and watch TV and embroider” (169).

Dimple is influenced by the American television and dutifully notes down household recipes and home keeping tips. She is so affected by food shows and program on interior decoration that she speaks about furniture and food obsessively. At yet another dinner party at Meena's place, Dimple chooses to prepare only a salad. She selects the most 'American' looking recipe for salad and purposely uses foreign, and in her case, exotic ingredients to display her eagerness to 'belong' to America. Nigella Lawson says that cooking has become a spectator sport (Ashley et al. 172). Cookery shows disseminate sensuous pleasure and according to Ashley et al, endorse a kind of leisurely and opulent lifestyle (171). To a certain extent, it is true in Dimple's case as she enjoys watching cookery shows while she does not enjoy eating. Food shows like several other soap operas she watches regularly, are strictly prescriptive for her.

Therefore, these recipes and plots are mechanized formulae that she dreams of replicating in her ill-equipped kitchen and life. She develops an obsession for TV shows that is tantamount to reverence and starts imitating not only the recipes but also the way of life that TV propagates, including violence. Just as she enumerates ingredients and methods for cooking, she starts preparing recipes for suicide and murder too. She makes several gory plans to commit suicide and murder her husband. Similarly, adultery is so glamourized in American television that Dimple does not flinch from it, and plays by the clichéd rules of the soap sagas. Her caviar salad is inspired by television and Milt, her white American acquaintance, impresses her particularly because he could imitate and cook like a celebrity chef from the television cookery show.

There are several instances when Dimple uses the kitchen as a refuge from the unsettling realities of her life as a lonely immigrant woman. The kitchen helps her put on a façade of docility and adhere to the normative codes of an Indian married woman. She resorts to her culinary skills in order to shield herself from the intimidating conversation between Ina and Leni. She goes to the kitchen on the pretext of brewing tea because of her dislike for Leni, "The kitchen was pitch-dark and warm... She hoped that the water would take a long time to boil-she had filled the kettle to the brim-so she would not have to go back into the living room until Ina and Leni had finished screaming..." (149). Dimple pours tea for Leni, and in her frenzy she pours the entire tea pot into the cup, thereby burning the latter. Ultimately, Leni flees the apartment with Ina, which makes Dimple feel triumphant. Tea and kitchen not only become an escapist trope, but also an object of resistance which enables her to relish her minor success story.

Fakrul Alam maintains that "Dimple's bizarre behavior is meant to underline Mukherjee's contempt for fashionable feminists, even though it is quite clear that she has committed herself to writing sympathetically of the plight of Indian wives from a quasi-feminist perspective" (46). The feminist critics have identified a dichotomous relationship between the witch and the angel of the house. Ina is the former who is presented as "more American than the Americans" (68). She is a foil to the overtly angelic Dimple. Ina is endowed with the qualities that Dimple yearns to possess but is afraid to acknowledge the fact. Dimple is mesmerized and scandalized by Ina's 'unBengali' way of life.

Normally, Ina is unconventional not only because she drinks and smokes but also because she never performs any domestic chores and disdains household tasks. She poses as a feminist; although her elitism and unbridled ‘Americanization’ undercuts her own principles. When Dimple feeds Ina and remarks at her scrimping, the latter retorts “Why is food our national obsession? Why don’t we make more time for happiness? For lover?” (95). Surprisingly, Dimple seems to have an explanation “I guess, it’s all that starvation” (95). Dimple knows that the scarcity and the material poverty in the Indian subcontinent make cooking and food related activities much more significant than in the cultures blessed with surpluses. Dimple’s starvation is more psychological in nature than physical, where she starves for more attention, love and glamour and this starvation leads to her obsession with cookery. Contrastingly, Ina lives her life unbridled; she confesses that though she was like Dimple when she first came to the United States, she drastically moulded her identity beyond recognition. She trivializes food and cookery and anything to do with the domestic lives of women because she has unlimited and unrestricted access to the world outside. She represents the American opulence in stark contradistinction to the Indian scarcity symbolized by Dimple. Ina can successfully transform herself, because she can transcend the boundaries of the domestic domain. Thus, Mukherjee undoubtedly upholds the kitchen as a place of refuge from cultural shock; nonetheless, she implies that the true progress of a female immigrant subject takes place when she transcends that comforting albeit constricting zone and moves out into the world outside.

In her kitchen, Dimple has sporadic spells of anger and paranoia. Instead of feeling happy at Amit’s compliment about her being a good cook she is afraid of their physical proximity, “if he were to come any closer, he could push her head into the oven and let it warm 375° and serve it instead of the chicken that was cooking” (110). This streak of paranoia gives birth to anger which subsides because of bunny oven mitts which Amit wears making her laugh. She was “grateful that Marsha (her renter) kept these weapons to defuse anger” (111). Throughout the novel, kitchen is foregrounded as the site for the final onslaught, in the same kitchen and with yet another “weapon” she kills her husband for no apparent reason. Thus, she had created the pre-text for her husband’s murder for a long time. The ‘recipe’ of her husband’s dead body was ready in her mind for a long time and in one of her psychotic spells she executes it. The sharpening of the violent streak in her, which is a consequence of cultural alienation, may be seen as a kind of Americanization.

Her guilt at having an affair with Milt and her hatred for Amit bottles up and she starts hallucinating while watching television, she sees a birdcage with a bird who has a face of a human infant inside the cage, “Not that it was uncomfortable: there was a bowl of water and birdseed and the swing was a lot of fun, if you liked to swing” (210). This bird cage symbolizes the cage of her domestic life where her basic necessities like food and shelter are provided for, yet she yearns to be set free and the infant face may allude to her aborted child. She further envisions that a man (who resembles Milt) takes the bird out and kills it. Thus, Dimple is terribly burdened by guilt and confusion. Immediately after she has the bird cage apparition, Amit decides to check Dimple’s housekeeping budget, he criticizes her for overspending and

suggests cooking economical vegetables like potato instead of broccoli. She silently plans an offensive against her husband who was challenging her in her own domain i.e. the kitchen. She watches Amit intently and is irritated by the noisy manner in which he eats wheaties.

She noticed the Wheaties flakes on the counter. And sugar – he always spilled sugar on the counter. It was one of the little things that irritated her. She thought how horrible to have to spend a whole lifetime watching him spill sugar on counters, how many pounds of wasted sugar that would add up to in thirty years or forty years; but he never thought of such things... (212).

She draws her vegetable knife quietly and stabs her husband seven times on her “favorite spot”, on his neck “until the milk on the bowl of cereal was a pretty pink and the flakes were mushy and would have embarrassed any advertiser” (212). Her mental derangement which begins because of her confinement in the kitchen, leads her to murder her husband. The most emphatic line of the novel is the closing line, “Women on television got away with murder” (213). The author with her black humour implies that Dimple has brought doom upon herself by murdering her husband as she would have to spend the remaining time of her life in judicial confinement which is worse than the domestic one. Thus, the “weapons” of the kitchen, which could have empowered the protagonist, lead to her tragic downfall. The culinary idiom constricts the immigrant subject and increases the sense of alienation and shock despite offering momentary comforts.

From the foregoing analysis it is clear that the kitchen becomes the space which enables the protagonist to steer her life, and although shortly, mould her identity in America. However, her neurosis prevents her from educating the full empowering and restorative potential of food and cookery. She questions cookery as a liberating activity for immigrant women but at the same time foregrounds ethnic food as a trope of resistance against the cultural hegemony of America. Mukherjee neither forthrightly dismisses cookery as a useless relic of the third world sensibility, nor does she hail it, but she problematizes her position on food. Neither does she uphold feminine virtue in highlighting cookery nor does she totally deride it in the conventional feminist mode, but she constantly exploits the interplay of food, body and decay.

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