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CRITICAL RESPONSES TO
WORLD OF ENGLISH LITERATURE
(A Peer-Reviewed Research Papers of the One day National Seminar)

ISBN : 978-93-81658-04-8

Muse English Literary Association
Department of English
Udaya College of Arts & Science
Vellamodi, Ammandivilai Post [Pin- 629 204]
Kanyakumari District Tamil Nadu, India.
Critical Responses to World of English Literature
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Title of the Book: Critical Responses to World of English Literature
Editor-in-Chief: K. Hema Latha
Editors: K. Kaviarasu
S. Sree Latha
F. Samson
G. Maria Rosamal
I.P. Remya
A. Mary Cisin Shemanayaki

Publisher: KAAS Publications Division
Kanniyakumari Academy of Arts & Sciences (KAAS) Nagercoil - 629 001.

Pages: 249
ISBN: 978-93-81658-04-8
Printed at: Print Point Offset
St. Joseph Convent Complex
Cape Road, Nagercoil – 629 001.
Ph: 04652-234396

The Board of Editors or the Publisher is not responsible for the statements or opinions expressed by the author of the published articles.

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[Ammandivilai Post [Pin: 629 204] Kanyakumari district Tamil Nadu, India.]

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THE DISILLUSIONED EXPATRIATE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE’S *WIFE* - A STUDY

K. KALAIARASI

Research Scholar, Nagercoil

The writers who were born in India and settled in America are specifically called as Asian American writers. In more recent times, the term ‘Diaspora’ has been applied to a number of ethnic and racial groups living distant from their traditional homelands. Asian American writings come under the category of Diasporic Writings. Speaking of the Indian diaspora, writers generally refer to persons of Indian birth or ethnicity living abroad, usually by free election and often for economic, artistic or social advantage. Many are first-generation expatriates who continue to consider India their true home. The Asian population of the United States today continues to rapidly increase and they constitute about 2.9% of the total American population. Some important Asian American writers are Meena Alexander, Chitra Divakaruni, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Bharati Mukherjee.

The novels of Bharati Mukherjee reflect the temperament and mood of the present American society as experienced by the immigrants in America. She paid special attention to the condition of the Indian women immigrants in North America. They long to assert their individuality because of their immigration. Their rootless makes them feel alienated and isolated in the midst of others.

Mukherjee opens her novel *Wife* in a true Indian tradition of story-telling. The simple opening line: “Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon” (1) is quiet telling and at once sets the scene that anticipates something unnatural. Mukherjee’s choice of the name of the heroine as Dimple is a deliberate one and her intentions are quite explicit from the cover page of the novel where she quotes the OED (Oxford English Dictionary) definition of ‘Dimple’ as ‘any slight surface depression’. From the very beginning we feel that Dimple is far from normal girls. Dimple has nothing to do except thinking about marriage because it will bring her freedom, fortune and perfect happiness.

Dimple is twenty but she bewails for wasted years. Nothing pleases her more than the imagination about marrying a fellow who provides her all creature-comfort. She is supposed to be studying for university examination but books irritate her. At last Mr. Dasgupta finds a suitable match, Amit Basu, a Consultant Engineer for Dimpl. He has already applied for immigration to Canada at USA and his job application is also pending in Keny. Dimple is all ecstatic about her marriage and does a lot of shopping becoming the occasion. She comes to Amit’s residence at Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road after her marriage. Basus are good people but their house is not that spacious and attractive. From the very beginning, Dimple do not feel easy at the house of Amit Basu. She does not like Amit’s mother and sister also. Her mother-in-law dislikes her name ‘Dimple’ and wants to call her ‘Nandhini’ instead which simply infuriates the bride. However, Dimple thinks that all these problems are temporary and with the confirmation for immigration they will eventually come to an end. She frequently talks with her husband about the anticipated foreign trip though “thoughts of living in Africa or North America terrify her” (17).

Dimple Basu has always lived in a fantastic world a world which is created by herself. All her dream crumble one by one and she is deeply upset. She thinks that waiting for marriage was better than getting married. She starts hating everything. Dimple thinks that marriage has robbed her of all romantic yearnings. Amit was not the man Dimple had imagined for her husband. When he is out of the house, she starts creating the man of her dream. “She borrowed a fashioned from an aspirin ad, the lips, eyes and chin from a body builder and shoulders, the stomach and legs from a trousers ad and put them all together” (23).

With the passing of time the excitement of marriage...
diminishes and she becomes pregnant, a stage known for vomiting tendency. Her killing of the mice which looked pregnant suggests that she does not feel at ease with her pregnancy. She becomes almost hysterical in killing that tiny creature without any rhyme and reason. This act of killing is a manifestation of violence and is smouldering inside her. Her repulsion with her own pregnancy is born out of her hatred for Amit who fails to feed her fantasy world. Dimple is about to migrate but she does “not want to carry any relics from her old life” (42). She thinks that old things will remind her of frustrations and irritations. She counts her pregnancy also among the relics and ponders over the ways of getting rid of it. At last by skipping ropes. The description of her self-abortion is very poignant and touching. “She had skipped rope until her legs grew numb and her stomach burned; then she had poured water from the heavy bucket over her head, shoulders, over the tight little curve of her stomach. She poured until the last of the blood washed off her legs; then she had collapsed” (42).

She never repents for the cruel deed she has committed by killing a perspective human life. In a review of Wife, Rosanne Klass comments: “For an Indian wife, Childlessness is a disaster, pregnancy the achievement that seals her status. To overturn such ingrained values would involve a major emotional upheaval; yet Dimple acts on the vaguest and most undefined impulses, and thinks no more about it” (88).

Unfortunately, one day in order to avoid his involvement in a bribery case, Amit resigns his job and soon, the couple emigrates to New York where they stay at Jyoti and Meena Sens’ house. Dimple’s happiness of migration to US is inexpressible. She prepares well and sees to it that nothing she misses which is necessary for a new life. She feels like being freed from the brazen fetters of servile domesticity. On the eve of their departure, Pixie organises a grand party at which she invites mostly the media persons. Dimple meets Ratna Das, a middle aged modern wife of a media brat there who does not give any importance to America. She says “It might be fun to go for a vacation . . . . But I would not want to settle there” (46). Pixie echoes the same sentiment “I would want to feel foreigner all my life” (46). But this hardly deters Dimple from her resolution.

For her, “real happiness was just in the movies or in the West” (47).

Jyoti and Meena Sen receive them at the airport. On the way to the Sens in New York, Amit is unmindful of the scene outside the car and is busy enquiring about job opportunities in America. Dimple feels excited and a little scared as well. She has never been to a city bigger than Calcutta and the magnificence of the city of New York terrifies her. The Sen apartment at Queens is all Indian inside. Sens are very conscious of their identity and they never try to come out of the ghetto, their “little-India” which is around them. Getting a job in America is not an easy cake, if a person happens to be an Indian. Both Dimple and Amit do not stay happily owing to their weak economic condition. Though for as many as four months the Basu’s live in Sens’ house, Amit does not get a job. Jyoti Sen teaches Amit all tricks of the trade, the codes of conduct for Indian professionals in America to thrive: “Work twice as hard, keep your mouth shut and you’ll be a millionaire in fifteen years” (56).

Instead of the social visibility and relevance which marriage gave to her in India, Dimple now suffers from cultural and social invisibility and disempowerment which on the everyday level reduce her marital relationship to random details from which she tries, and fails, to piece together a recognizable reality. Dimple thought: “She was caught in the cross fire of an American communalism she could not understand. She felt she’d come very close to getting killed on her third morning in America” (60).

Amit’s frustration is now obvious because he finds himself still jobless. As the days pass by, he becomes more impatient and his confidence starts shaking. This embitters his relationship with Dimple and petty-fogging becomes the order of the day. Amit expects Dimple to be a good Bengali wife, taking care of her home and husband and adapting to life in American society without becoming too influenced, too Americanized. The party of Mullicks – Ina and Bijoy – gives Dimple an opportunity to meet people both Indians and Native Americans and study their behaviour. Here she meets Ina, the notorious wife of Bijoy Mullick for the first time. Sens and others are disgusted with this Indian Lady because “she wears pants and mascara” (61) and “is more American than the Americans” (68). She is a chain smoker, drinks, flirts
and goes to night schools. She has a particular theory about Indian immigrants: “It takes them a year to get India out of their system. In the second year they’ve bought all the things they’ve hungered for. So then they go back, or they stay here and vegetate or else they’ve got to live here like anyone else” (76).

Indian society is a patriarchal society and it hardly permits a woman to talk of liberation and equality. Here male members decide the fate of their female counterpart. Sens have cautioned Amit to keep Dimple out of touch with Ina. It is at this party that Dimple and Amit meet Marsha and Prodosh Mookerji - their future benefactors. For Dimple, Milt Glasser, brother of Marsha, is like a riddle. She is instantly attracted towards his tall and lanky personality and his courteous manners though “Dimple could follow the way he talked, the things he talked about and the amazing leaps between his conversations” (83).

With the passage of time, Dimple starts feeling that she is deceived in marriage and Amit is a good-for-nothing husband. Insomnia becomes her accustomed habit. She suddenly realizes that “she hated the Sens’ apartment, sofa-bed, the wall rug” (88). Amit’s unemployment was the root cause of all troubles. He is not the man Dimple had wanted as husband. She thinks that her marriage to Amit is a failure of her dreams. A terrible encounter with an American shopkeeper over buying cheese, and many more news about American’s barbarous acts of violence, sex and bloodshed do not go without frightening and corrupting Dimple. She reacts even to small things. The inflexibility of a familial structure does not account for her changing needs and desires.

Dimple has always dreamt of a splendid apartment fully furnished and accomplished with all sorts of appliances. Marsha’s flat is like a dream come true for her. However, the burden of responsibilities in terms of watering the plants and cleaning the kitchen, etc., is to her greatly annoying. Amit feels lonely and wishes if they could have shifted near the Sens. Quite often Dimple feels irritated even over trifles. One day while Amit was reading something she complains of exhaustion which he attributes to her meagre diet. She loses her temper at this inference. The furious outburst of Dimple shows her accumulated frustrations. She was suffering from inferiority complex and thinks that she is unable to win her husband’s love. Amit may also be blamed for his ignorance of female psychology. He thinks that providing creature comforts is enough and hardly bothers for her emotional needs. So Amit tells her: “You must go out make friends, do something constructive, not stay at home and think about Calcutta” (111).

In America, she realises how easy it was to live, communicate, and to share with people in Calcutta. She never felt frightened at the sight of the policemen whose faces were so friendly, but the scene has change completely in the new environment. She does not want to lose her identity but feels isolated, trapped, alienated and marginalised. The greatest alter ego of a girl after marriage is her husband with whom she shares her inmost hear but Dimple cannot do that. She keeps everything secret from Amit. Asnani in her Identity Crisis in the Newer Man and Life pertinently describes Dimple’s mental state to the ‘dilemma of culture’: “Dimple is entrapped in dilemma of tensions between American culture and society and the traditional constraints of an Indian wife, between a feminist desire to be assertive and independent and the Indian need to be submissive and self-effacing” (42).

At times when loneliness becomes unbearable Dimple contemplates as many as seven ways of committing suicide. It seems as if she is in love with whatever is dark, evil, sinister, gruesome—murder, suicide mugging these are all fascinating words for her. Even her ways of getting rid of life are fanciful like a television advertisement. She does not trust anybody but medi For her suicidal thoughts springs the idea of murdering her husband. But nowhere in the novel, has Amit seemed to have exploited her by cruelly either burdening her with household work or by neglecting her pleasures in life. He is always worried about her well-being. Therefore they converse without communication: living together while remaining strangers.

Dimple is anxious to settle her scores with America. Her spirit rebels, she starts going out with Ina and M and enjoys all the prohibited freedom. She seduces M and keeps it a secret from Amit. Dimple’s dress at a sunglass is described as: “they are a disguise borrowed from the West, just like Marsha’s clothes and the apartment in which she is living” (50). She turns neuro
and fails to differentiate between what she sees on television and what she experiences herself in real life. She is now an alienated being undergoing the supposed after effects of alienation. She has numerous complaints against life.

Dimple starts realising that her life was slow, full of miscalculations. Amit could only visualise the external changes in Dimple and he explains it as a case of “culture shock”. He even promises to take her to Calcutta. But this does not prove helpful. Dimple starts contemplating the murder of her husband. The violence outside turns inside. The idea of slaughtering her husband fascinates her. She thinks: “She would kill Amit and hide his body in the freezer... made her feel very American some how, almost like a character in a TV series” (195). Amit fails to mark the emotional cracking up of Dimple. The trouble with Dimple is that she loses touch with reality. Guilt of seducing Milt and also of keeping everything a secret from Amit vexes her. She loses her sleep and becomes a sleep-walker like Lady Macbeth and ultimately kills Amit without actually thinking about its consequences.

By stabbing seven times, it seems, Dimple frees herself from the marriage tie. Some critics are of the view that Dimple’s gruesome act has nothing to do with ‘cultural shock’. She is not a victim of ‘expatriation’ but is instead a victim of her own neurotic sensibility fed on popular advertisement fantasies. K.S. Narayan Rao looks at it from a specific angle: “The novel raises an important question: Was the Indian wife happier in India with her limited freedom and greater docility, or does she achieve happiness in her painful search for more individual freedom and in the process of maturing?” (22).

Thus, Wife is full of morbid thoughts arising out of Dimple’s tedium vitae. New York has nothing to do with her obsession. The stages in her mental derangement are developed meticulously. 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 Basu who is a victim in India as also in New York. His murder signifies how an innocent, duty-conscious husband falls a prey to the neurotic madness and disillusionment of his wife.

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MANIFESTATION OF DIASPORIC CONSCIENCE IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Dr. P. Kolappadhas

P. G. Department of English and Research Centre
S. T. Hindu College
Nagercoil - 629 002
TAMILNADU, INDIA
MANIFESTATION OF DIASPORIC CONSCIENCE IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

ISBN : 978-93-84446-02-4

Editor : Dr. P. Kolappadhas

Price : ₹ 695

Published by :
MANIBHARATHI PUBLISHERS
New No. 47, West Car Street
Chidambaram - 608 001

Printed at :
MANIBHARATHI ACHAGAM
New No. 47, West Car Street, Chidambaram - 608 001
04144-221603, 8903292640
E-mail : manibarathipress@yahoo.co.in

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Transgression: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee’s Desirable Daughters

K. Kalaiarasi
Assistant Professor
St. Jerome’s College
Nagercoil

Dr. K. Kaviarasu
Assistant Professor
Bishop Heber College
Nagercoil

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most prominent writers in diasporic writings. In her novel Desirable Daughters she has realistically portrayed the diasporic experiences of the protagonist, Tara. The story is about three sisters namely Tara, Padma and Parvathi. Tara practices a different intelligence of home in changed locations. As a significance of her relocation, her individuality is transformed through the dislocation from numerous homes. Tara’s first home is placed in India and it is a place where she studies the gender roles she is supposed to play in life. Tara’s withdrawal from India places her at one more home, the gated public of Atherton, California, evident by the imitation of gender relationships learned in India, her home-country. Subsequently, Tara, the protagonist, fights and settles down in her Upper Straight house in California.

Padma was born in 1958. She is the elder sister and six years senior to Tara. Tara calls Padma simply ‘Didi’. Big sister, Padma has also settled in the same places as her youngest sister. In spite of her short halt in Switzerland and London Padma has made her home in the same geographical places as that of Tara. Both were born in India raised in Calcutta and settled in the United States.

Although there are resemblances between the places the sisters inhabited, the way Padma seems to deal with and define home is quite different from her sister’s. As her sister, Padma has the same home in India. She also lives in the fort-like house in Calcutta enjoying the privileges of the Bengali Brahmins. She learns in that house that she is the eldest desirable daughter of Motilal Bhattacharjee and is made-up to play the gender roles suggested for her family’s caste, class and religion.

Tara, in the same way, obtains a proper education in convent schools so that she can be seen as an educated bride in the marriage market. In sum, Padma inhabits a male-controlled domestic situation in which she should
follow the old-fashioned gender roles of her culture. She is raised up and sheltered in her father’s home so that she can properly enter her husband’s.

From Tara’s narrative, it is possible to see that Padma expresses the will to commit some transgressions in terms of gender roles while she was living at home with her family. In a point Padma started to protest against the gender roles by planning to marry a guy who does not belong to her caste and religion. To change her inner mind her father sends her to Switzerland to complete her schoolings there. From there, she moves to London and then to New York and never really returns to India. The so-called ease and safety of Padma’s private sphere, home and home-country do not assure her the freedom of choice she wants for her life and that is why she transfers away from it.

Padma seems to distance herself from home in a strange way. At the same time she physically and psychologically displaces herself from home. She tries to reproduce home in the location she currently inhabits. Tara visits the house of Padma and stays there for some days and from her the readers come to know about her way of living in New York to Tara, Padma’s house is cold and does not seem to be truly inhabited. As Tara, the novel’s protagonist describes it, “There was no evidence that anyone actually used the living room; no television, no books, no papers or magazines strewn on the tables. The house was kept cold and dark, uncluttered as a crypt, with halls sealed off and the curtains drawn. Nothing out of place, but nothing to get misplaced either. I could not imagine their home ever having been used for parties or dinners” (182).

When Tara visits at their house, her sister, “Mehta does not care about entertaining Tara while she waits for her sister’s arrival. Instead, he only reappears the moment his wife arrives and pays her compliments, which sound insincere in Tara’s view” (183). Padma’s sisters wonder why she, a girl who seemed to be so passionate towards life, could have married an unenthusiastic man such as Harish. As observed by Tara during her stay, their relationship does not seem to be constructed on love and companionship. Both husband and wife appear to stay aloof from each other.

Padma’s house, marriage and also her overall attitudes in the novel are artificial. Tara has difficulty in understanding how her sister is able to isolate herself from American influences and to keep such a traditional and artificial presentation of Indianess in spite of her dislocation from her homeland. At the same time, she sees the ambiguities in her sister’s
behaviour. As she observes, “In public, she was calm and gracious, her voice and manner soothing and engaged. In private, nothing outside her immediate interest penetrated, and she seethed with bitterness” (213).

Even though Padma lives away from India for several years, she someway succeeds to reproduce the conventional exoticism of her civilisation in New York. On the other hand, Tara feels that she is quite different from her sister: For some reason, “perhaps the six years’ difference in our ages and the invisible fault line that ran between us, I loved my family and culture but had walked away from the struggle to preserve them. In San Francisco, I barely knew any Indians. But Didi, whose every utterance was couched in hatred for those times and for the family and for the city, was trying to lead a traditional Bengali life in New Jersey” (189).

Padma does not wear Western clothes. She conserves the tradition of women of her class in having the preoccupation of taking proper care of her beauty as well as always wearing a sari and jewellery. Padma outwardly imitates the gender and ethnic roles she has learned in India.

Padma plays the role of the old-fashioned Bengali woman by performing that part on television shows, at local schools, on community shows, at parties and political events. “Although her activities are never well defined, she can be said to be a multicultural performance artist” (99).

Thus Padma needs at the same time to move away from and to preserve home. The superficial construction of home in terms of safety and comfort actually turns into imprisonment and restraint to her. Home then is a place to escape from and she moves to the United States. Padma’s boldness of reproducing Indian civilisation and old-fashioned gender roles is certainly just a performance or make-believe. She is not the traditional wife, sister, daughter and perhaps mother as defined by her culture. Padma uses her dislocation from home as a means of protesting against the restraining and preventive structures of home and of obtaining the liberty of choice and the career opportunities that she yearns for.

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