CHAPTER-II

SPECTRUM OF SELF-REMOVAL

(WIFE)

*Wife* is a blend of Mukherjee’s attitudes towards India, Canada and USA. Calcutta is actually the initial setting of the novel, although at the time of writing she was in Canada. This novel is partly a reflection of Mukherjee’s difficulties to adapt to life in Canada, the country that considered South Asians as racially other and that its policy of the mosaic works to support ethnic differentiation. New York then becomes the epicenter of the novel although metonymically she being the author is writing about her own sense of insecurity in Toronto and her feeling of alienation in Canadian society. *Wife* (*9175*) unravels the story of an Indian wife, Dimple Dasgupta, who is married to an engineer, Amit Basu, and who migrates to US. Very soon afterwards, bewildered by the challenges of plunging herself into the new community, she is simultaneously pulled back by the past and burdened by the obligation of being an obedient woman. These binary circumstances are reflected in the moments of incoherence, disruption and splitting found in the novel. Keya Ganguly further stresses: “The women are thus positioned in thoroughly ambiguous ways. On the one hand, they have to reconcile themselves to diminished lives in which there are no outside supports or rewards for their efforts
and activities; on the other, they are actively interested in the patriarchal ideology that the institutions of marriage and family are beyond reproach, and that any compromise is merited if it means keeping the domestic front secure” (1992:44). However, Dimple’s integration to the host land is unsuccessful, as Anne Brewster asserts, Wife also articulates a bleak vision of an immigrant woman’s failure to assimilate into Western culture (1993:2). Sushma Tandon adds that Dimple’s problem of integrating herself with the host society does not lie outside her. She would remain a foreigner wherever she is to go. On the other hand, Alam argues that it is Amit Basu, her husband, who is the one major obstacle in Dimple’s quest for identity. Although Dimple does not seem to be as confident and ambitious as Jasmine to adapt herself to the new environment, she should not be seen as a complete failure. Dimple has her own way of inserting herself into American society and liberating herself from Amit's patriarchal rules.

Even though Dimple’s deed of killing Amit in the end of the novel cannot be justified, the murder itself is Dimple’s way to integrate and remove one major obstacle in Dimple’s quest for identity. The murder is not the end of Dimple; it is, in fact, the beginning of Dimple’s journey as a migrant woman. Wife is divided into three parts, modelled on the changing phases of Dimple’s life. The first part of the novel traces Dimple’s getting married to Amit Basu and learning to live in a joint family with Mrs. Basu, her mother-in-law. The second part of the novel marks Dimple’s migration to the U.S. with her husband. In
Queens they live in another joint family in the flat of Amit’s friend, Jyoti Sen. In fact, Dimple and Amit never live independently from their friends, always having to rely on their help and hospitality. The third part of the novel describes their temporary moving to a sophisticated part of New York, Manhattan. They live in a luxurious apartment that belongs to Jyoti’s friends, Prodosh and Marsha, who are away on sabbatical. In this apartment, they are freed from joint family life for a while. Significantly, Dimple’s difficulties in adapting to the alien West apparently reflect Mukherjee’s own experience of discrimination in Canada. As Sybil Steinberg states, Mukherjee’s characters have always reflected her own circumstances and personal concerns, and one is able to trace her growth in self-confidence and her slowly developing identity as an American (1989:1). Dimple and Mukherjee, in this case, have something in common in terms of their migrant experience, though in the case of Mukherjee, she rejects the nostalgia (Brewster, 1993:3). In certain circumstances Dimple tries to adapt herself to an American lifestyle but her desire to retain her Indianness is somehow much stronger. Dimple’s effort to retain her Indianness shows that she does not wish to give away her past, a part of her original identity. The past becomes an important element in her subjectivity. Fakrul Alam writes that, Mukherjee here focuses on an Indian wife who is willing to immerse herself in the life and the mores of urban America but who is also being pulled back, at least for the time being, by her Indianness (1996:83).

Dimple’s migrant experience is the combination of expatriation’and
exile’, the term that Mukherjee uses in ‘Imagining Homeland’. Mukherjee defines expatriation as an effort to retain one’s original culture which is followed by a conscious resistance to total inclusion in the new host society. The definition itself, however, cannot be applied wholly to Dimple’s experience. Dimple, indeed, still sustains and preserves her Indianness, but she does not totally exclude herself from contact with America. Meanwhile, Mukherjee speaks about exile as the comparative luxury of self-removal which is replaced by harsh compulsion. The spectrum of choice is gravely narrowed. The ties of the exiles to their mother countries are still strong. In this case, there is a slight similarity between an expatriate and an exile which can be observed in Dimple. Both an exile and an expatriate keep maintaining their ties to the motherland, the past, by preserving the aspects of the past in the host land. Dimple’s sense of connecting herself to the past is still strong. Rosemary Marangoly George also points out, exile, though very different from immigration, is the other instance in which one carries the baggage of the past along wherever one wanders. This chapter will elaborate on the importance of the past and show how the past influences Dimple’s immigrant life.

First, it will discuss how Indian traditions such as arranged marriage, joint family, and wife’s devotion towards the husband had shaped Dimple’s migrant existence. Indeed, Dimple spends much of her time attempting to preserve tradition. Tradition represents the past or Indianness. The discussion will follow the sequence of locations in the novel to track down Dimple’s
development as a diaporic person for whom geography, culture, and ethnicity are being replaced by configurations of power, community, space and time. Lastly, the chapter will examine how Indian traditions and the past combined with her present circumstances in North America shape Dimple’s diaporic identity.

Hindu tradition has been a substantial force ruling each phase of an Indian woman’s life. Ketu H. Katrak, the writer of Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World asserts, Cultural traditions control a woman’s entire life from early socialization as a daughter, to indoctrination into a wife (polygamy or nuclear family), mother, or if less fortunate, into widowhood. Dimple Dasgupta, a twenty-year-old Bengali woman who wants “a different kind of lif and who has set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon” (3). She cannot resist the traditional roles that seem to be fated for her. Tradition in fact follows Dimple when she emigrates to the U.S. as she still has to deal with Hindu patriarchal values carried over to the host land. The Hindu patriarchal values come through in the demands of her husband, Amit, for example. Indeed, the novel seems to contradict Brah’s statement that the reconfigurations of these genderist social relations will not be a matter of direct superimposition of patriarchal forms deriving from the country of emigration over those that obtain in the country to which immigration has occurred. Dimple’s restricted situations are not changed by migration, the experience of being away from home. Three cultural practices can be identified which
mostly affect Dimple’s life: arranged marriage, joint family, and necessity of being a devoted wife and docile woman.

For example, as a Bengali girl, Dimple does not have the right to choose her own bridegroom, so cannot guarantee he will come from neurosurgeons and architects. The responsibility of choosing the appropriate bridegroom belongs to her father, Mr. Dasgupta, an electrical engineer in Calcutta Electric Supply Company, who is inclined to look for engineers in the matrimonial ads. J. P. Singh points out that, “the majority of marriages in India are still fixed or arranged by parents or elders on behalf of and with or without the consent of the boy or the girl involved” (143). Many girls are in fact not in a position to choose their partners, due to the restriction placed on free interaction between a boy and a girl in India. Thus they “have no chance of knowing a bit of each other’s nature, temperament, sentiments, feelings, or aspirations” (Mitra, 1946:256).

This is not only restricted to one caste, and Nanda states that among the educated middle classes in modern, urban India, marriage is as much a concern of the families as it is of the individuals. Moreover, in Wife, Mr. Dasgupta’s responsibility for finding his daughter an appropriate husband is clearly backed up by Mrs. Dasgupta, “Why are you worrying? ‘Mrs Dasgupta often asked her daughter: Just wait and see; your father will find you an outstanding husband” (4). Mukherjee herself seems to be disapproving of this practice, since in the novel she reveals that, in mid-January, when the weather
had turned quite chilly and Dimple had to use a quilt in bed, Mr. Dasgupta announced that he had found his ideal boy. The cold, the quote marks and the stress on her suggest an ironical tone criticizing how an Indian daughter may not have her own autonomy to choose her bridegroom. Family control, has the purpose of ensuring the bride marries the chosen man from an equal caste and class, as Serena Nanda states: “[i]t is understood that matches would be arranged only within same caste and general social class, although some crossing of subcastes is permissible if the class positions of the bride’s and groom’s families are similar. Although the aim is meant to be positive, marriage often involves shifting authority from father to husband” (Katrank, 2006:166), ensuring that the daughter’s lack of agency is transferred to the wife.

Amit Basu, a consultant engineer is chosen as Dimple’s short, dark Prince Charming. Amit’s opportunity to emigrate to the U.S. was one of the considerations Dimple’s family took into account when selecting him as bridegroom. In this case, migrating to the U.S. is considered to be an opportunity to improve one’s life. Ganguly points out that “immigration has given them [migrant men] the opportunity to obtain financial security and also dignity, not merely back home, [but] as well as secured him a better life there” (35). Therefore the wedding is welcomed by Dimple’s family and by her best friend, Pixie. Pixie comments: “What a lucky girl you are! You’ll be in America before you know it. I’ll still be slogging away at my typing and shorthand” (16). However, Dimple has different feelings. The thoughts of living in
Africa or North America terrified her. She wanted to know how long they
would stay, but she didn’t know quite how to ask it without revealing her fear.
Ironically, although Mr. Dasgupta is satisfied with the marriage arrangements, the
bridegroom’s mother and sister, Mrs. Basu and Mrs. Ghose, had made their
point: ‘Dimple Dasgupta was not their first choice’.

Given that she strongly resents her inability to participate in the selection
of her husband to be, the arranged marriage has negative consequences for
Dimple. Dimple feels treated as property, her feelings totally ignored.
Arranged marriage seems to treat the union of husband and wife not as a
sacred moment but as a property exchange. It is shown in the family’s objecting
to Dimple because her name is not Bengali and her skin is dark. Like an object
that has a flaw, Dimple’s dark skin is hastily covered with more whitening
creams and homemade bleaching pastes, as Mr. Dasgupta tells his wife to
camouflage Dimple’s complexion. The parents are afraid that this flaw would
prevent Dimple from getting a proper husband and the chance of migrating to the
U.S., something which will elevate the status of the family as well. Mukherjee
makes her view on the issue known by stressing the demands faced by Dimple:
for example, since her mother-in-law, Mrs. Basu does not like her name, Dimple
has to go by the name of Nandini’, which Dimple finds strange, old
fashioned and unsung. In *Jasmine*, Jyoti, the female character seems to
gladly accept the changing names and takes them as part of her significant self-
metamorphosis. In contrast, Dimple is forced to take her new name.
Moreover, since the possibility of knowing the bridegroom is quite limited in an arranged marriage, Dimple avoids worrying Amit since she finds out that he seems to be restrictive and neglectful. She feels that: Amit would always be there beside her in his shiny, ill-fitting suits, acting as her conscience and common sense. It was sad, she thought, how marriage cut off glittering alternatives. If fate had assigned her not Amit but some other engineer, she might have been a very different kind of person.

Dimple also feels that Amit as part of the agreement has taken over all decision makings about their apartment, something which makes Dimple unhappy. She complains that the apartment is ‘h-o-r-i-d’ and the water has to be carried up in buckets and stored since the tap in the bathroom is broken. Unable to get to know him before marriage, she finds out too late that Amit is a disappointment. In a further sign of the way Mukherjee views such relations, Amit also feels dissatisfied with Dimple; he says, “I always thought I’d marry a tall girl. You know the kind I mean, one meter sixty-one or sixty two centimetres, tall and slim. Also convent educated, fluent in English”(26). In other words, the novel highlights that in this kind of union both partners suffer. Dimple is especially discouraged, feeling that there was nothing she could do about her height except stand straight and dress wisely. But what excuse could she offer him for her spoken English? “Although initially she thinks that marriage would free her, fill her with passion, it left her as someone going into [an] exile” (16). Tracing Dimple's story in the second and the third parts of
the novel, marriage arguably leads her into exile. Emigrating to the U.S alienates her, and living in an extended family itself is another form of exile for Dimple. Dimple’s status as a daughter-in-law in an extended family isolates her, since tradition determines that a daughter-in-law is an alien in the household. Nanda points out that joint family is a common cultural practice in India, particularly when the couple would be living in the joint family that is with the boy’s parents and his married brothers and their families, as well as with unmarried siblings which is also still very common even among the urban, upper-middle class in India. However, although the practice of joint-family living is taken for granted within an Indian household, this tradition, to some extent, also restricts a woman’s capacity to have her own decision on managing the household and be independent. In Jasmine, the modern husband Prakash rejects the practice of joint family and decides to live separately from their big family. Mukherjee delicately confronts the aspects of the male characters, Prakash and Amit in *Jasmine* and *Wife*. The two husbands definitely have opposing characteristics: Prakash is an open-minded, modern, and encouraging husband. Amit, in contrast, is an old-fashioned, patriarchal and restrictive husband. Each husband has his own role in the wife’s process of adaptation in the new land.

When Dimple and Amit get married, they move to a three-story building on Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road, a place where they live with Mrs. Basu and Pintu, her brother-in-law. Dimple does not feel comfortable joining Amit’s family; rather she felt there were too many people in the apartment on Dr. Sarat
Banerjee Road, too many people to make demands on her, driving her crazy. Aside from this emotional and psychological response, she does not like how things are arranged in her mother-in-law’s house. She wants to arrange things as she wishes, according to her image of normal “young marrieds who were always going to decorators and selecting their’ colors, especially their bedroom colors. That was supposed to be the best part of getting married: being free and expressing yourself” (20). Living together with her husband’s family constrains Dimple. She thinks that she would like to be back of her ‘own room in Rash Behari Avenue, on a bed cluttered with broken backed books’. But, as Mukherjee reveals from her own experience of living in an extended family during her own teenage years, “in the traditional Bengali Hindu family of [her] kind to want privacy was to be selfish. That was why [she] was so entranced by the idea of Iceland having little population and lots of space” (1992-3:153).

Extended family and joint-family have their own meanings in India. According to J.P. Singh, “large stem/extended family is (a) a household head and spouse with married son(s)/daughter(s) and their spouses; and (b) household head without spouse but with at least two married son(s)/daughter(s) and their spouses” (2005:137). Meanwhile, joint-family is relatively defined as “(a) household head and spouse with married brother(s)/sister(s) and their spouses with or without other relation (s) including married relation (s); and (b) household without spouse but with at least two married brothers or sisters and their spouses with or without other
relations” (*ibid*). In the case of Dimple in the first part of the novel, since she lives with her mother-in-law and brother-in-law, this form of family is categorized as an extended family. Moreover, as a Bengali wife, Dimple is expected to be an obedient and devoted woman to her husband and mother-in-law. Although the role of being a mother is important in Hindu tradition particularly for bearing and nurturing a male baby, the role of wife is even more important. As Susan S. Wadley states, the wifely role is pre-eminent in Hinduism, the maternal only secondary. Thus whereas mythology and law books provide endless models of the good wife-Sita, there are no prime examples of good mother. Sita, one of the goddesses in Hindu mythology represents the model of a devoted, submissive and faithful wife, as she exemplifies the behaviour of the proper Hindu wife, devotedly following her husband into exile for twelve years and Indian women are expected to emulate Sita. The story of Sita who accompanied her husband into exile may also represent the stories of many Indian migrant wives who, for the sake of improving their lives, migrate out of India. Dimple is one of them since in all her life she had been trained to please. As her father says in the first match making meeting, she is so sweet and docile and ‘she will never give a moment’s headache’. As a husband, Amit expects Dimple, like Sita, to jump into fire if necessary, and to serve him. However, Mukherjee introduces the issue in order to critique it, and personally has long spoken out against the traditional idea of wifehood. In an interview with Francisco Collado Rodriguez (1995), Mukherjee asserts “as a
woman writing in the 1990s and as a feminist born in India I had to reject the Sita model” (301). These views are rehearsed in Part One of the novel which comprises letters by editors and readers that debate the issue of marriage and the role of Sita as a wife model. Mukherjee’s rejection of tradition, particularly in the case of widow burning (sati) as a form of the wife’s devotion to her husband, is especially evident in this section.

Furthermore, Dimple’s role as a wife to Amit is not only limited to serving him: she also must care for his mother, who is sick. Unfortunately, Mrs. Basu seems to be reluctant to get close to Dimple. Indeed, Dimple’s effort to take care of Mrs. Basu is misunderstood as her way of taking over things in the house. Dimple faces her mother-in-law’s frequent abuse: “Watch it! Mrs. Basu exclaimed. -You almost smothered me with that net! You want to kill me so you can get my gold bangles!” (25). Mrs. Basu’s statement is a means of controlling her daughter-in-law but also reveals that she fears that her authority as the head of the house will be taken over by Dimple. Like wives and daughters-in-law, the mother-in-law too has a particular position within Hindu households. She has to be highly respected and served especially by her daughter-in-law; she dominates the arrangement of the household. Daughters-in-law are expected to devote her life fully to serve their mothers-in-law. This often creates disputes between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in an Indian extended family, since daughters-in-law are considered major disputants. Significantly, the domineering presence of Dimple’s mother-in-law still echoes during her
migrant’s life in US. Tradition has truly configured Dimple’s identity as a Bengali woman. Tradition determines not merely Dimple’s life as a teenager and wife in Calcutta but also later as an Indian migrant woman in US. Tradition suppresses Dimple’s diasporic life in the form of Amit’s demand on Dimple to be a submissive wife.

Migrating to another country demands that a person adapt herself to the host land. This situation creates a tussle between past and present, old and new worlds. Bharati Mukherjee’s works are full of female characters who like her, migrate to the U.S. She creates female characters that are flexible to any changes, paralleling her own migrant experience. She reveals that ‘the kinds of women who attract me, who intrigue me, are those who are adaptable’ (Mukherjee in Connell, 1990:19) and contrasts the idea of the adaptable woman with the teaching of being a Bengali wife. As Bengali women, they have all been trained –to please, been trained to be adaptable wives and this has been a great advantage for those who migrate. In fact, being flexible in one’s experience of migrating and negotiating with the host land does not mean that one should discard the past, as Mukherjee has suggested. The past contributes significantly in forming diasporic identity as Iain Chambers (1994) points out: “[n]one of us can simply choose another language, as though we could completely abandon our previous history and freely opt for another one. Our previous sense of knowledge, language and identity, our peculiar inheritance,
cannot be simply rubbed out of the story, cancelled (24). The importance of the past in Dimple’s life in the U.S and how the past influenced and shaped her diasporic identity along with the Indian tradition that still embedded within her. The importance of the past will be traced through Dimple's settling in the U.S., specifically in Queens and Manhattan. Indian migrations to the U.S. have in fact created their spatial patterns and conceptions of space. Queens and Manhattan are the areas of New York City within which the largest population of Indian immigrants can be found. New York City has become the choice of Indian immigrants because it has substantial number of earlier settlers and relatively wider range of careers. Dimple’s movement has implicitly revealed her mobilization from the periphery of India (Rash Behari Avenue to Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road) to the centre of the U.S. which is the typical of the Indian diasporic experience. The Queens part explores Dimple's experiences as an Indian migrant wife after she moves with her husband to the U.S., where they live in Jyoti Sen’s apartment in Queens along with his wife and daughter, Meena and Archana Sen. Queens is described as having an atmosphere that is really like a little Ballygunje. This area is quite well-known among the Indian migrants as the receiving areas for newly arrived immigrants. As an immigrant, luggage is very valuable to Dimple. Mukherjee clearly shows how Dimple frets about her belongings upon her departure to US. The packing moments in Wife and as we shall see later in Jasmine seem to be significant focuses that have particular meaning of the whole journey and define their
characteristics as migrants. As it is her first time going overseas, she is overwhelmed. Sometimes ‘she packed and unpacked her suitcase several times’ but ‘at other times she wanted to walk onto the plane carrying just a small purse and nothing else’. Rosemary Marangoloy George asserts over and over again, in the literature of immigration and exile, there are scenes that (lovingly, as a matter of fact or in despair) catalogue the varied luggage that immigrants carry over.

In the case of Dimple, like a soldier, she arms herself with a full package of Indian goods brought from Calcutta. This luggage and its content are the packages of the past that define her identity as a Bengali woman and render her different to others. To a certain extent, the luggage represents the past that is carried over and is expected to enable her survival of adapting herself to the host land. Her mother’s straight-forward advice establishes her nature as a Bengali by reminding her to treat her hair well and undervalues the Americans’ knowledge about dealing with hair: Don’t forget to pack two or three good combs and a packet of big hairpins. Also coconut hair oil, Mrs. Dasgupta said on the phone. –Americans have rotten hair. They don’t know anything about her oils. Dimple obediently went to the store and bought five combs, two packages of sturdy, black hairpins and three bottles of coconut oil, then wrapped them in a cotton petticoat and put them at the bottom of her suitcase. Coconut oil particularly defines Dimple’s identity as a Bengali as it is typical of Bengali women’s hair treatment. Bringing coconut oil to the
U.S. reflects the extension of Dimple’s past into her present or migrant’s time.

Arriving in New York, she and Amit stay with Jyoti Sen and his family at their apartment. Although Dimple has migrated to the U.S., the nature of joint family living pursues her. Joint family as a Hindu tradition has simply carried over to her life in US. As Susan Koshy points out, the constraints of the joint family are unexpectedly recreated in the suffocating proximity of the Indian immigrant community in New York. However, while joint family restricts Dimple’s ability to manage her own household, living together with another Indian family in the ghetto strengthens her and her husband’s position in the U.S. as newcomers. Dimple moves from one form of joint family in India (with her big family and her mother-in-law) to another form of joint family in the U.S. (with Jyoti Sen’s family). Singh defines the kind of joint family Dimple lives in the U.S. as household head and spouse with married brother(s)/sister(s) and their spouses with or without other relation(s) including married relation(s) (2005:137). In fact, living together with Jyoti in Queens is mutually beneficial to Dimple and to Jyoti’s family. Since Dimple and Amit have just arrived in America and do not know their surroundings, living with Jyoti’s family enables them to adapt to the completely new culture and circumstances. Besides, it is also good for Amit’s networking so as to find a job. Keya Ganguly asserts that, –some men had had college friends from India living in this country, and the transition was made easier for them since they were inserted into familiar social networks.
Furthermore, joint family living enables Dimple and Amit to make friends with other Indians such as Prodosh and Marsha Mookerjii, Bijoy and Ina Mullick and also Milt Glasser. Ina Mullick, Bijoy’s wife, has attracted Dimple’s attention because of her being more Americanized than other Indian women. She is fascinated by Ina’s wearing white pants and a printed shirt that ended in a large knot. It never comes to her mind that an Indian woman (like Ina Mullick) might behave as most American women do. To Dimple, the figure of an Indian woman should be a devoted one like Sita. This is quite understandable since –Dimple had been brought up to think of women only as beautiful, pretty, or good mothers.

Although neither Amit nor Dimple had ever travelled so far in their whole life, they have different perceptions of migrating to US. Mukherjee states that her male and female characters perceive the notion of migration differently. She remarks: We’ve all been trained to please, been trained to be adaptable as wives, and that adaptability is working to the women’s advantage when we come over as immigrants. The males function very well as engineers or doctors or whatever, and they earn good money, but they have locked their heart against mainstream culture. They seem to be afraid of pollution. Their notion of India seems to have frozen in the year in which they left India, and they don’t want to change.

To Dimple, America with its bigness ‘seems to be thrilling and a little scary
as well. On the other hand, Amit’s perception is quite practical and realistic. As they listen to Jyoti’s stories about America, it is quite clear that they are curious about different matters. Even small things like the back seat of the Cutlass, television and a vacuum cleaner amaze Dimple. She remains concentrated on the skyscrapers, taller than anything in Calcutta, and on the enormous cars speeding in regimented lanes. She had never seen such bigness before. To Dimple, these new things seem to be different, both attractive and alienating. Amit, however, sees America as a gold mine in which he can get a job and good salary that can improve his financial status and his respectability as the breadwinner in the family. He does not seem to care about –the bigness of America that Dimple so admires at. Rather, Amit wanted to know only what kind of job he might expect to get. He asked questions on starting salaries, rents for apartments in Queens where the Sens lived, food costs and gasoline shortages.

Dimple is also startled by the new form of English she encounters in the U.S. notably the way Jyoti speaks English with a Bengali mix. She thinks that Jyoti spoke in a fast and funny mixture of English and Bengali, and Dimple wondered if in a few months she and Amit too would speak that curious language. The English itself is not pure English but it is blended with the speaker’s first language. In the context of migrant people, adapting to the language of the host land may take unique pathways since the language is appropriated, taken apart, and then put back together with a new inflection, an
unexpected accent, a further twist in the tale. This also suggests that the past is always carried over, not abandoned; it thrives side by side with the original identity, though it is intertwined with other aspects of the host land. Brah states that, the partial suppression of a sense of one identity by the assertion of another does not mean, however, that different identities cannot co-exist.

Dimple’s relationship with the English language is complex and before she migrated to the U.S. Dimple had already had problems with her English. For example, while they are still living in Calcutta, she thinks that it is dangerous to learn too much English and Amit even complaint about her English proficiency. Although Dimple is supposed to be familiar with the English language, as knowledge of English is a characteristic of postcolonial Indian immigrants to the United States, which distinguishes them from most other Asian or Latino immigrants. She feels discouraged when she hears all Western music, raucous singing. Her English had grown less confident since she’d arrived in America.

One other moment that also evokes Dimple’s awareness of her poor command of English happens when she goes shopping with Meena. Dimple fills her early days by going out shopping with Meena. This can also be considered an informal education for Dimple to get along with the surroundings of Queens. Meena deliberately tests her by asking Dimple to
buy her cheesecake from Schwartz’s Deli while she waits outside with Archana and the groceries. To Dimple who is still green and inexperienced in getting along with the Americans, this request feels like a punishment, since she is not comfortable with her English. She reacts to Meena’s request with a moment of panic, reflecting inwardly: She wished she had not mentioned anything about buying dessert. If she had known she would have to go into the store by herself and tell the salesman in English what she wanted and count out the change, she would have kept quiet.

Her first encounter with Americans shocks her. She views the shop man’s words and reception as a racist attack on a Bengali woman like her. Dimple suddenly flings back to the past and takes herself back to Lake Market in Calcutta, where she always went shopping where twenty hawkers would be grabbing at her for any small change she had. They’d do anything to please her, cut a tangerine in half if she had only ten paise. What was wrong with her money? In Calcutta she’d buy from Muslims, Biharis, Christians, Nepalis. She was used to mingle with many races; she’d never been a communalist. And so long as she had money to spend no one would ask her what community she belonged to. She tries to think logically about the shop man’s reception towards her. To Dimple, buying from any race in Lake Market is a common thing. Her effort of recuperating the past reassures her that there is nothing wrong with her and her money. Buying from American or Muslims, or Biharis is
all the same to her. Dimple’s comparison of the services at Schwartz’s deli and at Lake Market outlines her feelings toward those two places. Since it is her first experience of shopping in a place like Schwartz’s deli, she is anxious. This is of course quite different from her experience at Lake Market, a place that is quite familiar to her.

Another form of Dimple’s attachment to her Indianness is learning to knot her husband’s tie using Indian instructions. Accompanying her husband in America, Dimple has to adapt herself to the patterns of America. Although Dimple did not get a Western education from her parents, in America she is forced to learn it herself. She had learned to tie a knot from a brochure she had picked up in a men’s clothing store on Park Street where her father had done the dowry shopping. Learning to tie a knot had been her final maidenly accomplishment. This skill becomes important when she moves to the U.S. since Amit has underlined that wives count for a lot when it comes to hiring and promotion in this country. Dimple might have to meet the bosses. Dimple’s mother has never knotted her father’s ties. Dimple thinks that it is necessary for her to know how to knot – the Windsor or the half-Windsor but she feels much more comfortable to learn it from the Indian instructions. She says that she liked Indian instructions; they were always so explicit. Dimple’s command of English can be the reason why it is easier for her to learn to tie a knot following from the Indian instructions. They represent Dimple’s past. The experience also reveals how Dimple integrates her Indianness to carry out her duty as a wife in the host
Moreover, as an Indian wife she believes that she ought to behave normally like other Indian women. She should not drink, behave or wear dresses in the way of American women. The hold of tradition still remains even though Dimple has moved away from Calcutta. However, the tussle between the past and her present moment as an Indian immigrant puts her in a difficult situation. This happens once at Ina’s party, when the hostess tempts her to have a gin and lime. Dimple knows that as an obedient wife and daughter-in-law she should not accept this offer. But soon it becomes quite obvious that she is torn between her duty to be an obedient wife and daughter-in-law and her desire to appease Ina as the host. The fear of being a disgrace to her family haunts her. The fact that her mother-in-law would acknowledge her attitudes in the host land is unconsciously carried over through her migrant’s mind. Accepting Ina’s offer of a gin will complicate her relationship with her husband and also her original identity. She feels that, Amit was waiting for just the right answer, that it was up to her to uphold Bengali womanhood, marriage and male pride. The right answer, “I do not need stimulants to feel happy in my husband’s presence … my obligation is to my husband, seemed to dance before her eyes as though it were printed on a card. All she had to do was read it, but she feared Ina’s laughter, or anger, more than anything in the world. If she took a drink she knew Amit would write it to his mother and his mother would call the Dasguptas and accuse them of raising an immoral, drunken daughter. The Calcutta rumor mill operated as
effectively from New York as it did from Park Street” (78). India remains quite strong within her but she resolves the dilemma of wanting to find a place in America by compromising, promising herself, maybe a very weak one, next time, she said. Dimple negotiates between not rejecting Ina’s offer and disrespecting her own husband. She is caught between satisfying the two sides of herself, one formed by Indian traditions and the other by her present situation in New York. To Dimple, migrating to the U.S. gives her opportunity to develop herself and she dreams that she might be a more exciting person, take evening classes perhaps, and become a librarian. She had heard that many Indian wives in the states became librarians. Dimple thinks that diasporic circumstance may enhance her skills and liberate her to choose what she herself wants. Her hopes are undermined by Amit’s patriarchal demand that she be an obedient Indian wife. Dimple is again confronted with the reproduction of patriarchal values in the host land. Although Vinod Khanna, one of Jyoti’s friends offers her a position as a salesgirl, she cannot accept it since Amit insists, –one breadwinner in the family is quite enough. He ridicules her, doubting Dimple’s ability of adding two and two and commenting on the possibility of ruining the business. He asserts that a woman’s life should be restricted to a television and a child, then a woman shouldn’t have any time to get crazy ideas. Amit is not supportive of Dimple’s desire for change but that desire is not supposed to be seen as negative. It is in fact Dimple’s effort to fulfil herself. Indeed, Amit’s demand is more the result of selfishness than convention since in their migrant situation, it is quite permissible
for Dimple to get a job.

Dimple in fact has decided that she will not change herself into an Indian-American woman like Ina Mullick. During Ina's visit to Meena's apartment, she tries to get close to Dimple and show her a leaflet of a woman in sari and bikini. Ina marks the changes of the woman as hers, that’s me, she said, with a shallow laugh. Writing letters to her parents and friends in India is Dimple’s other way to revisit the past and make connection with the homeland. Letters become her means to release her burden of alienation of the new world. The idea of writing a letter to her parents and friend in India initially comes to her mind when she realizes that migration has created an impossible homecoming and to Dimple, leaving Calcutta for good was still unreal. This has provided her with strength to adaptation. In fact, although Dimple finds that writing offers relief from her loneliness, Amit thinks that Dimple still cannot release herself from the past (Calcutta) by remarking to Dimple, “I guess your heart’s still in Calcutta, … You write too often to your parents” (7).

The second part of this novel shows that although Dimple does not get her own privacy living with Jyoti’s family and does not like the situation at Jyoti’s house, she finds a Bengali atmosphere in Queens and is not really alienated. She does not entirely leave her Indianess; perhaps as Brah states, the past cannot be expunged so easily, for we carry their traces in our psyche. In fact, even though Dimple is very much thrilled by her migrating and living in the U.S., the
impediments of adapting herself at the same time as a migrant and wife change her into a hesitant and timid woman. The past and tradition support Dimple in two opposite ways. The past comforts her with its familiarity. On the other hand, tradition restraints her effort of integrating herself to the host land and Amit burdens her with too many ideas of how to be a devoted wife. Koshy writes that, to the oppressiveness of her derivative identity as wife is added the burden of preserving ethnic identity within the home, in order to shore up her insecure husband in an alien culture. Likewise, Mannur also points out that women are always subjected to domestic duty and more than that charged with maintaining the edifice of home life. Manhattan marks the climax of Dimple’s life as a wife and an immigrant: finally, she moves from the periphery to the centre: from India to Queens, then to Manhattan. Dimple and Amit move out and stay temporarily at Prodosh and Marsha’s apartment in Manhattan as these couples are away on their academic sabbatical. The move out of the Sens’place releases Dimple from the burden of joint-family living and she starts her own life with Amit.Desiring her own place has given her a new kind of certainty, almost arrogance. The high-rise apartment on Bleecker Street, Manhattan, introduces Dimple to another American life-style which is not so India. It is a distinctive area in the U.S. where the haves gather. It is different from Queens, which is quite famous as an Indian ghetto. Madhulika S. Khandelwal (1995) distinguishes the boroughs of Queens and Manhattan thus during the last two decades, both kinds of Indian spaces exist parallel to
each other the first, in Manhattan, a continuation of the intellectual, upper middle-class and elite Indians of the pre-1965 patterns, and the second, in Queens, representing increased diversity and population expansion. Yet, although the atmosphere of Manhattan is not so Indian, it does not stop Dimple from preserving Hindu traditions such as celebrating Durga Pujah. Durga Pujah is one of the annual religious ceremonies held from the seventh to the tenth days of the waxing moon in the Bengali month of Ashvina (September fifteenth to October fourteenth) (Sarma, 1969:580). Durga is the symbol of the daughter’s returning to her father’s house from her husband’s, for a visit (Sarma, 1969:581). Remembering Durga Pujah, one of the important celebrations in Hindu tradition, reflects Dimple’s attempt to reiterate the past. Looking hesitantly at her new surrounding, she reflects: it was something else, like knowing that if she were to go out the front door, down the elevator (she was frightened by self-service elevators with their red Emergency buttons and wished there were a liftman on a stool to press the right buttons for her), if she were to stand in the lobby and say to the first ten people she saw, Do you know it’s almost October and Durga Pujah is coming? They would think she was mad. She could not live with people who didn’t understand about Durga Pujah.

Durga Pujah reminds Dimple of her original roots, the place where she comes from. During this ceremony celebration, normally a daughter and particularly one who is newly wed, returns to her parental homes. For Dimple, this
will be her first time of celebrating Durga Pujah away from her big family in India. She realizes that the context she lives in now, Manhattan, does not permit her to celebrate Durga Pujah as it is performed in India. Alienated by her surroundings, Dimple desires to go back to India to celebrate it and pay respect to the elders. Paying respect to the elders is a must for an Indian daughter like Dimple. Respecting and showing her efforts to re-connect herself to her Indian homeland. She blames Amit, How can you be so heartless? Don’t you want to see your mother and Pintu? What about your sister? Don’t I want to see my mother and father?

Dimple and Amit have different perspectives on celebrating Durga Pujah. Dimple thinks that celebrating Durga Pujah is a prime moment. Amit, on the other hand sees Dimple’s idea of returning to India (for Durga Pujah) as a waste of money and time. Their divergent reactions echo Ganguly’s view that, - both men and women reinvent the past and themselves, but in contrasting ways which are specific to the gendering of experience. She writes that the men seemed to be more concerned with representing the constraints of their pasts and with privileging the present. Thus, Amit’s perception is quite practical and realistic: “we can’t afford it! He returned to the game on television. -Besides, we’ve only been away four months. What’s the matter with you?. He judges Dimple’s desire to return to India an abnormality’, and without offering much comfort, he concludes by saying ‘I don’t want to talk about it, okay? he said, without taking his eyes off the screen. “I couldn’t get leave. Anyway I wouldn’t even dare
ask for leave at this stage, so don’t get your hopes up” (145).

Dimple’s engagement with the past is also shown through her gatherings with her Indian friends. These experiences provide Dimple with a sense of connection to home, although in Manhattan, Dimple does not gather with her friends as often as she did in Queens. Mostly only her friends like Ina and Milt come to the apartment. One of the gatherings Dimple goes to is held by a Bengali community to celebrate a special day like Saraswati Pujah. This religious ceremony is held in January or February. Saraswati is the symbol of knowledge and is very popular among the students. Dimple and Amit go to the smaller and more informal Pujah, which did not involve any religious rites or heavy subscriptions, but a lot of friends having potluck and seeing an old movie. While the celebration of Saraswati Pujah and gathering with friends reveals the need to strengthen emotional attachments with their homeland, the celebration also implicitly reveals the class they belong to and Amit’s effort of saving the money. However, Manhattan leaves Dimple isolated from her roots as she cannot feel the Indian atmosphere here as she did in Queens, since not many of their Indian friends live in this area. Although this new environment is fancy, it is unfamiliar to Dimple and puts her under pressure. Her bad communication with Amit and Ina worsens the situation. Dimple’s intention to return to India before they are sixty implicitly reveals her homesickness. In this context, *Wife* as a novel tends to romanticize the past India through Dimple’s longing to return to India and her alienated feeling toward the host
land. For Dimple and Amit, it is obvious that the financial success and respect of their friends back home in Calcutta are the things that justify their struggle in the U.S.: “Her tactful domestic virtues and Amit’s savings would accrue steadily and they would retire to Calcutta before they were sixty to lead circumspect lives, envied by those friends who had never left” (151). For an immigrant, the notion of homesickness may reveal an ambiguous feeling toward the mother land and the host land. Susan Stanford Friedman in her study of how home may particularly define immigrants ‘identities’ and their emotional attachment to the motherland and the host land in a diasporic context points out that the idea of homesickness is a cryptogram. Homesickness has dual opposite meanings: sick for home and sick of home (2004:191). In Dimple and Jyoti, the cases of homesickness are different. In Dimple’s diasporic situation, she is sick for Calcutta, her far away home. Her feeling of sick for home is shown through her longing for Calcutta, the place where she was born and she feels comfortable and homey. Home is not Queens or Manhattan, the places where she feels alienated. Thinking about home (Calcutta) gives Dimple comfort and compensates for the alienated atmosphere that she experiences in Manhattan. The memory of India strengthens her days as an Indian migrant and wife. The old world, Calcutta, provides her with the sense of familiarity and ease. When she hurts her husband’s fingers inadvertently, she defends herself by saying that –this wouldn’t have happened if we had stayed in Calcutta, “… I was never so
nervous back home. Do you think I was nervous”? (132). Manhattan undoubtedly upsets her, although she is aware that she had expected pain when she had come to America. She told herself that pain was part of any new beginning, and in the sweet structures of that new life had allotted pain a special place. Meanwhile, her feeling of homesickness seems to be ambiguous since the feeling is both directed toward Calcutta and America. Unlike Jyoti, Dimple at some other time shows her anger toward Calcutta, as the source of the patriarchal values which is now carried over to the diasporic circumstances by Amit, her husband. Dimple’s being sick of home is particularly directed toward America, her new home. The feeling is mostly stimulated by her alienation and her depression because of Amit’s patriarchal demands.

In contrast, Amit seems to be comfortable with the place and with the challenges of living in US. This situation inevitably affects Dimple total well being and her situation increasingly resembles that described by Ketu Katrak in such settings ‘unfulfilled wifehood is expressed in physical ailment, nervous breakdown, and madness’. It is Jyoti who first recognizes Dimple’s physical change when they have dinner together in Queens and he says, “What have you been doing to your wife, Amit old chap? Is he trying to starve you, or what? Look how nice and fat Meena is, even after the baby!” (166). Dimple is not very much aware of her physical change after they moved to Manhattan. She starts to think that this situation is unbalanced and –she wondered what it was about the Mookerji’s apartment in Manhattan that made Amit fatter and her
thinner instead of levelling out their differences and making them look like happy brother and sister.

Living in Manhattan, out of the Indian ghetto, does not stimulate her to change her original attire. Although Manhattan introduces Dimple to the real ‘American life and American friend, she keeps wearing saris as her daily attire. Khandelwal points out, female Indian immigrants considered dress integral to their identity and donning traditional dress was seen as preserving one’s culture in the United States and Indian women are one of few immigrants that still wear their traditional clothes in the US. Ina Mullick, Dimple’s friend, brings over her pants and asks Dimple to try them on. Dimple rejects Ina’s presents ‘by saying ‘I feel more normal in a sari!’ On one occasion, however, she seems to be ambivalent, in a recollection of her reaction when offered a gin and lime. She is conflicted between retaining the sari as part of her identity and the desire to imitate the American style. Going out with Milt, Dimple seeks to assimilate herself to the American life style and to blur her differences as an Indian woman. But, this process of blending herself with the American life while retaining her past comes at a price; her identity is fragmented and fractured. Going shopping with Milt, for example, Dimple borrows Marsha’s printed sweater and blue jeans that were too long for her. At the same time, she also feels that dressing up in other people’s clothes could be so much fun. She also feels that she is betraying her own identity as if she is an enemy agent in disguise. Even Ina, who tries so hard to assimilate admits to Dimple, “I think it’s better to
stay a Before, if you can. She adds –our trouble here is that we imitate badly, and we preserve things even worse” (176). Her statement implies the double bind that Dimple finds herself in, intensified by her isolation. Food and eating habits are other aspects of identity that Dimple does not abandon although now she lives in Manhattan. In a study of an Indian immigrant community in New York City Khandelwal notes that, Indian immigrants brought their food-related traditions to New York. They were often heard defining their culture in terms of their regional or religious foodways. In our culture, we eat a particular dish or in our community, food is prepared in a particular way. It is through the food that Dimple recreates or replicates the sense of Calcutta in the U.S. For instance, by emptying Horlick’s bottles and filling them with spices to take with her to the States. These small items support Dimple’s attempt to survive as an Indian in the U.S. where she anticipates finding hard to buy Indian spices. Living in the U.S. does not necessarily change her eating habit. In deed, cooking and eating Indian cuisine are the unifying aspects of her identity. These small items become potent symbols for signifying the ethnic integrity of Asian Americans, that serving both as placeholder for marking cultural distinctiveness and as palliative for dislocation.

Consuming Darjeeling tea also shows Dimple’s attempts to attach herself to her past. This has been part of her daily life in Manhattan. When Milt visits he asks her to make him or her famous Darjeeling tea. Dimple also tells Ina she believes that Darjeeling tea may improve their tempers. Darjeeling tea
represents things from home (Calcutta), although as Amit says, nowadays they are exported and they have to come to New York to have a good Indian tea. In this case, Darjeeling tea has become a transnational commodity which fulfils the desire of Indian migrants like Dimple for a nostalgic past.

Dimple, however, also opens herself to the Western cuisine. She eats it mostly because she wants to please her American friend, Milt. This effort shows how Dimple has actually adapted herself to the new environment and mingled with American society. Her friendship with Milt induces her to cook other food which is not to Indian taste. Her initial intention of doing this is because she wants to respect Milt. When they got home, she helped Milt make hamburgers the pinkish meat got under her nails and for a while she feared Amit would be able to smell it on her for days to come and she ate almost a whole one with mustard and relish, and waited until Milt had left before rushing to the bathroom and throwing it up. With her forehead on the edge of the toilet bowl between heaves, she thought it was small price to pay for all the things she had done since moving into Manhattan. Although Dimple tries to force herself to cook and swallow the pinkish meat, she cannot do it. Being a vegetarian, she has been an integral part of Hindu identity. According to Khandelwal, a large part of India’s people live their entire lives without tasting animal products including eggs. Dimple herself cannot be categorized as a pure 'vegan since as she admits she still eats fish and chicken. The prohibition of eating meat is embedded within Dimple and the action of throwing it up is the manifestation of
her unconscious rejection toward it. Moreover, the feeling of fear toward Amit shows her obedience as an Indian wife although she is, in fact, already polluted by American cuisine. The same feeling also arises when she fears that Amit will catch her eating pizza with Ina and Milt. To Dimple, her first experience of pizza-eating was always so perilous. She usually came out of it scarred for days. She goes out twice to eat pizza with Milt and Ina and never with Amit. Leaving the house and eating pizza without her husband’s permission makes Dimple feeling guilty. Her efforts to comfort herself by thinking that eating a pizza, was after all, a very small crime and should not require too great an explanation. It shows that she does not really want to break the rules. It is the necessity of respecting her friends that forces her. These feelings of guilt and fear can be seen as expressions of her refusal to abandon her past. In relation to the story life of Sita, Dimple’s experiences are quite similar to Sita’s story. Both of them follow the husband into exile. Their faithfulness is tested by the presence of other men, in the case of Sita it is Ravana and Dimple is seduced by Milt Glasser. However, Dimple is not Sita at all. Sita fully devotes her life to her husband that she did not mind jumping into the pyre to show her faithfulness. Dimple, however, is evolving from a submissive wife to a rebellious one as she feels that the situation is depressing. Her alienated situation drives her to adore Milt and to consider him better than Amit. Milt is someone whom she could talk to. With the others, people like Amit and Ina and even Meena Sen, she talked in silences. Her disappointment with Amit grows and stimulates her to stab him once,
twice, seven times, each time a little harder, until the milk in the bowl of cereal was a pretty pink and the flakes were mushy and would have embarrassed any advertiser and then she saw the fall off. Stabbing her husband is the result of Dimple’s resentment toward the restriction placed on her by Amit and what he represents, and of her feeling alienated by her surroundings. She says that on Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road, she had experienced Amit in terms of permissions and restraints. Dimple seems to be silent as she knew Amit liked her to keep quiet and not make a fool of herself. Her silence, in fact, becomes her means of resisting Amit but it also isolates her. Minh-ha points out that silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing. It is voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right. In this way, Dimple’s action of killing her husband breaks down the assumption that she has failed to adapt herself to the host land, as Amit’s death removes the major obstacle in her progress toward selfhood and immersion in the brave new world of America. In an interview with Runar Vignisson, Mukherjee comments, “the tendency for the conventional white feminist might be to see my character in the novel Wife, Dimple Dasgupta, passive and I am saying that is a failure to understand a new kind of feminism what Dimple does”. (163-4). She asks white American women not to dictate to her, minority women, how to be free. Mukherjee asserts that although Amit’s murder is a misguided act, it’s meant to be a positive act. Nevertheless, Dimple’s action of killing her husband arouses various comments towards Dimple’s figure as an Indian wife. It is
deemed to be the darker side of psychological transformation and not its positive benefits. Dimple’s action of killing her husband is in fact the second murder that she commits. Before she migrate to the U.S., she has killed her baby deliberately, although she says that it’s not like murder and convinces herself that, she could never commit murder. She aborts her baby by skipping 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 had poured until the last of the blood washed off her legs. Then she had collapsed.

Mukherjee asserts that Dimple is quite distinct from other characters. Dimple, with her education and Bengaliness, is not operating on a purely instinctual level. She is more of a thinker. As a woman, Dimple is both constructive and destructive in her wifely and motherly roles. Her constructive and destructive character can be interrelated to the concept of the female in Hindu ideology which presents an essential duality. On the one hand, she is fertile, benevolent the bestower. She is aggressive, malevolent destroyer. She is at the same time Durga and Kali, who has a vast potential for aggression and destruction but is also generally beneficent. Durga and Kali are taken as symbols of women’s liberation. Dimple’s willingness to support her husband as a wife drives her to sacrifice her role as mother. But she realizes her submissions bring no rewards. She then turns to the new world of America, but guilt and her innate conservative learnings bring her past into play again.
and she changes from Sita to Kali exacting a vengeance that is past liberation.

This paradoxical moment is however typical of one whole book where past and present form a dynamic hybrid. She also tries to be an obedient wife to her husband, although in the end she cannot bear of thinking how hard it was for her to keep quiet and smile though she was falling apart like a very old toy that had been played with, sometimes quite roughly, by children who claimed to love her.

It is note worthy to mention at this point that on October 3, 1965, the United States passed a revised Immigration and Nationality Act abolishing the quota requirements of the 1920s that had limited the number of immigrants based on country of origin, allowing for a new wave of immigration from the Eastern Hemisphere. With the influx of immigrants came new cultures, traditions, and literatures. To cope with the radical shift in its ethnic composition, the United States fashioned itself into a multicultural society with the intention of reinstating the ideals of the American Dream tolerance and opportunity for all, especially the immigrants who ostensibly created the nation in the first place. As Lisa Lowe asserts in *Immigrant Acts*, her landmark work on Asian-American fiction, Culture is the medium of the present the imagined equivalences and identifications through which the individual invents lived relationship with the national collective but it is simultaneously the site that mediates the past, through which history is grasped as difference, as fragments, shocks, and flashes of disjunction. It is through culture that the subject becomes, acts, and speaks itself as American.
Ananda Rao

Lowe privileges culture over political change or governmental notions of citizenship as the site of national belonging because of its immediacy and transformative power. Culture rather than politics America rather than the United States serves as the mediating force for immigrants because it blends the temporal past and present with the spatial location in America. A person belongs to a culture by virtue of the similarities, imagined equivalences and relationships she can draw between her individual self and the nation. Despite the legal shift caused by the Immigration Act, however, American culture continued to define itself based on national origins, implementing a multicultural society that strove to identify (non-white) people based on where they came from and their pasts, not their current location or their present existence in America. Such a social formulation burst the *e pluribus unum* narrative of the American nation into fragmentary cultural groups that made immigration a crisis of identity for both the immigrants and the nation.

This multicultural situation confronts Bharati Mukherjee in her personal life and in her early fiction, particularly in *Wife* (1975), her second novel, and she both exposes and challenges it. Mukherjee wrote *Wife* while living in Canada, where she experienced racial discrimination and violence, which she attributed to the country’s structure of enforced cultural difference. Though Canada did not officially adopt a Multiculturalism Act until 1988, the government introduced the institutionalized idea in the 1970s, during which time Canada began to define itself culturally as a mosaic, a metaphor which stresses the brokenness and
disparateness of its materials and presents only a semblance of unity. In her essay American Dreamer, a publication adapted from a paper delivered for the Iowa Board of Humanities in 1994 titled Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties, Mukherjee lists the faults of multiculturalism: The multicultural mosaic implies a contiguity of fixed, self-sufficient, utterly distinct cultures. Multiculturalism, as it has been practiced in the United States in the past 10 years, implies the existence of a central culture, ringed by peripheral cultures. The fallout of official multiculturalism is the establishment of one culture as the norm and the rest as aberrations. At the same time, the multiculturalist emphasis on race- and ethnicity based group identity leads to a lack of respect for individual differences within each group. In 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced a Policy of Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework to the Canadian House of Commons. Although he states that no citizen or group of citizens is other than Canadian, he continues to assert a fundamental Canadian identity to which ethnic groups must defer particularly by way of language. The ethnic groups will be encouraged to share their cultural expression and values with other Canadians.

The idea of ethnic or cultural groups’ self-sufficiency suggests that the culture works on its own merit as a separate entity that obscures any diversity within each group, thereby withholding agency from the individual, particularly the immigrant. Furthermore, the cultural history purported by the group eradicates personal history, identifying people by their group affiliation rather than their individuality. Although Sam B. Girgus claims that “theories of ethnicity in
America have tended to project such a balance between the particular and the universal … that in adhering to one’s ethnicity and group origins, one also can achieve true American identity” (60). These theories seem to rest not on a balance but a deferral of the particular to the universal or collective, which maintains the insurmountable distinction between the two. Multiculturalism thus asks individuals to conceive of themselves not as continuous beings but as a series of cultures replacing one another, a sequence that prohibits change through the negotiations of hybridity, leaving both the nation and its individuals in a state of fixed difference. In *Wife*, Mukherjee exposes and challenges the hardships a multicultural society places on an immigrant or a minority. She sets the novel in the United States to reveal both the nation’s limitations in multiculturalism and the discrepancies between a policy of cultural difference and the American Dream of individualism and opportunity. In her portrayal of Dimple, a newlywed who immigrates from India to the United States and suffers under the disempowerment and pain caused by a multicultural society, Mukherjee depicts a fixed American culture that negates individual identity in favor of communal identities located in foreign culture, which limits the liberty and success its mythology promises. Only by subordinating both her isolated Indian and American cultural identities through violence can Dimple assert her individual agency. The violence arises from the frustration she feels in a society that prevents consideration of her past in India and her present in America as a continuum rather than opposing locales and cultures. Hence, Mukherjee exposes the pain of immigration while expressing a hope for
the revitalization of American national ideals and enables a return to an American space that enables rather than suppresses the individual. Embracing an American culture that accommodates rather than replaces or isolates immigrants’ originary cultures rejects an assimilationist model of immigration, in which the nation absorbs an immigrant into a dominant culture. It favors instead a hybrid model in which the immigrant reunites with culture in a fusion that constantly negotiates between past and present cultures to establish a new formulation that best serves the individual rather than the component cultures. As such, the identification with an accommodating American culture not a multicultural one constitutes an act of self determination rather than what Christopher Douglas identifies as racial prescriptivism, which yields statements of inherited identity, cultural, religious, or national that trump discussion of practice; essence continually precludes us from talking about existence in meaningful ways. Multiculturalism, in favoring fixed identities or, in other words, cultural essences suppresses the agency of the individual, especially the activity that fuses cultures in order to redefine the self. Christopher Douglas identifies the rejection of assimilation with the twentieth century’s third wave of immigration following the 1965 abolishment of national quotas: the meaning of contemporary literary multiculturalism its politics and canonical interventions was determined not so much by those different histories as by the much more recent simultaneous rejection in the 1960s and 1970s of a liberal assimilationist consensus.
We can use Homi Bhabha’s formulation of hybridity as a structure for reading the relationship between the individual, the nation, and her past and present cultures as well as a possible solution for the inherent disparities of multiculturalism. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha identifies the liminal spaces between defined cultures as the site for true cultural production: Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. If we identify the type of society that articulates difference as a multicultural one, we see that it does not try to authorize cultural hybridities but instead denies them, favoring cultural inheritance that forces the immigrant to identify with the culture of his past, the nation from which she came. As such, the society denies the immigrant acceptance, leaving her with feelings of alienation. A hybridized difference in which the multiple cultures with which the individual not the nation yields a new individual, a new American. Dimple’s immigrant situation, her own historical transformation from Indian to Indian immigrant, has the potential for negotiation of a new American identity, but a multicultural society’s insistence on difference that upholds the fixed tablet of tradition prohibits the hybridity that would legitimate her struggles in a new country and culture. Further contextualizing the discussion in the United States, Lisa Lowe provides a more
concrete model of engagement with differing cultures, identifying hybridization not as the free ‘oscillation between or among chosen identities but as an uneven process through which immigrant communities encounter the violences of the U.S. state and the process through which they survive those violence’s by living, inventing, and reproducing different cultural alternatives.

From the very beginning of Wife, the symptomatic alienation and ultimate impossibility of the multicultural finds expression through definition, often a violent act that strips away nuance and actual possibility. Mukherjee provides an epigraph to the novel a definition from the Oxford English Dictionary. Although definitions imply the fixed meaning of a word, Mukherjee alerts us to the impossibility of fixed reality, for we already see the conflation of a common Indian name with a standardized English word. Before the story even begins, Mukherjee presents Dimple as a hybrid subject existing in the space between English and Indian terms. Neither destroyed nor whole, the dimple invites violence to push it toward either completion or incompletion. Thus, even Dimple’s name reflects a hybrid state. Survival in America, then, depends on recognizing the potential of such hybridization and rejecting a multicultural society.

However, in Wife, Mukherjee presents us with a story of an immigrant who does not survive; so long forced to identify with either Indian or American culture, Dimple completely separates herself from any culture whatsoever, relying only on individual initiative, for that’s what it came down to, and her life had been devoted only to pleasing others, not herself. She pleases others by identifying with a group
culture that ignores her personal need to change in America and identifies her only by her role the Indian community sees Dimple as a wife, and multicultural America separates her from itself as an immigrant. As the novel ends, Dimple murders her husband, and Mukherjee leaves us with an image of Dimple talking to herself and to the knife that she used to stab him in one elongated run-on sentence that reflects her disintegration into insanity: “…and then she saw the head fall off but of course it was her imagination because she was not sure anymore what she had seen on TV and what she had seen in the private screen of three A.M….,” (213). No longer associated with any culture, least of all a successful, new, hybrid one, Dimple isolates herself completely. She exists as an unrealized transition, a middle ground between the fixed, disparate cultural identities of her immigrant community and the hybrid culture of the ideal America. The new America or, rather, an America that actually adheres to its principles of acceptance and possibility would reunite the individual to her culture(s) rather than supposing culture only belongs to groups, as in the immigrant community into which Dimple settles when she and her husband move to America. Forced by multiculturalism to deny their individual identities and define themselves as a group, the immigrant community has to look backwards to their past and to the culture from which they came. Stuart Hall regards culture not transcendentally but in temporal terms: “Cultural identities have histories that, far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past,…are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power” (225). However, if the cultural power that plays with cultural histories is
multiculturalism, it will suppose those histories eternally fixed and eternally separate and different. In a power play that subjectively creates these cultural histories and disguises them as objective and totalizing realities for all the immigrants associated with it, the multicultural society often relies on stereotypes or idealized images of Indian culture propagated by the media. Such focus on the validity of history frames many discussions in postcolonial studies. Edward Said frames much of his study in *Culture and Imperialism* with the commonest of strategies of appealing to the past to interpret the present, particularly in cultural terms. Studying these strategies illuminates the extraordinary influence of today’s anxieties and agendas on the pure images we construct of a privileged, genealogically useful past, a past in which we exclude unwanted elements, vestiges, narratives. Both imperialists and colonized peoples can serve as creators of useful pasts that either validate imperial power with longevity and tradition or construct images of a pre-colonial identity, respectively.

Although placed in an imperial context, Said’s framework functions equally as well when considered in a more specific immigrant situation, as in *Wife*. Mukherjee’s immigrant characters look back to their former lives in India and to media representations of that life, constructing cultural images and representations of pre-immigration to distinguish themselves from an exclusive American culture. In so doing, they accept older models of assimilation and repeat the same patterns of difference that multiculturalism assigns them. With both the majority and minority culture accepting the same social formulation, America remains stagnant
and resistant to revitalization and individualism. This American multiculturalism, according to Mukherjee, operates on a center periphery model which privileges the dominant culture. In *Wife*, Dimple’s community of Indians in America adheres to this model by privileging either Indian or American Culture. At an Indian dinner party that the newly arrived Dimple attends with her husband and their host family, discussion centers round a comparison between all things Indian and American, down to the banality of chickens. One guest asserts, though our chickens may be smaller and thinner they taste far, far better. ‘Everyone agreed with him’, substantiates Dimple’s impression that among them, India could do no wrong. The drive to compare starkly separates both cultures and allows the Indian immigrants to boast their inherent Indianness, a quality they feel compelled to display and perform. By comparing and privileging, the community avoids the sense of exile that troubles Dimple. Jyoti Sen, the man fostering Dimple and her husband Amit, said, wasn’t it wonderful that Indians abroad were so outgoing and open-minded. He alludes to the necessity of geographical displacement as a means of emphasizing difference not only between Americans and Indians but between Indians abroad and Indians in India in so doing, Mukherjee evokes a past and creates a temporal history for her community of immigrant characters. We see the conflict between constructed past and immigrant present when Dimple and Amit first arrive in America and Jyoti Sen greets them at the airport dressed in a red shirt and bright white pants, something a Bombay film star might try to wear. Dimple cannot take her host seriously, either professionally as an engineer or
culturally: She wouldn’t have taken him for a Bengali at first sight. Confronted with the differences of American culture, Jyoti feels compelled to perform an idealized version of the Indian culture he has left, which intensifies – or at the very least, maintains difference. Dimple, newly arrived to America, has not yet needed to create this cultural past and therefore finds Jyoti unbelievable, an imitator of an Indian. The performativity of the past only emphasizes its unreality and widens the distance between past and present and, in the immigrant’s case, between India and America. It fixes the two cultures in time and space, making change impossible in the present. To use Stuart Hall’s terms, such performativity limits the immigrant to the stagnancy of being instead of becoming. As an alternative to performing a fixed Indian culture, Mukherjee’s immigrants can opt to perform a fixed American culture, which suggests substituting one culture for another rather than joining multiple cultures to create a new one. In one of Dimple’s first and most shocking engagements with American culture, she attempts to buy a cheesecake for dessert (what she considers a very American thing to do in a Jewish delicatessen. She tries to perform an Americanness that one cannot simply adopt, and she ultimately emphasizes her difference from it. The proprietor of the deli mocks Dimple angrily for attempting to buy a non-kosher dairy product, for failing to understand cultural practices, leaving her feeling as though she’d come very close to getting killed on her third morning in America. This scene highlights Dimple’s alienation because she displaces herself in favor of adopting a culture to replace her own, and
the results shock her enough to fear death brought on by her environment’s inability to accept disparate cultures.

Mukherjee stresses cultural performativity to emphasize the clash with the ideal vision of America as the land of opportunity that embraces change, development, and diversity. Mukherjee ultimately wants to identify Americanness “as a cultural identity that immigrants cannot perform; nevertheless, they try. Even before moving to the United States, Amit tries to acculturate Dimple by taking her out. She dislikes having to eat with a knife and fork, but eating with her fingers, Bengali-style, in a restaurant, seemed terribly uncouth” (22). That one could learn to practice a culture, even in so quotidian a manner, without ever experiencing it, emphasizes performativity rather than character. Amit believes that urging his new wife to perform as American initiates the Americanization process. However, for these characters, the concept of Americanization exists only in noun form. Actual Americanization implies change; instead, the characters cultivate an Indian identity that performs a fixed version of culture in the United States and call it Americanization. Neither Indian nor American culture actually interacts or develops, for they remain fixed. As Amit teaches Dimple Western practices while they reside in India, he prepares for a future already defined and resistant to change.

In the U.S., Amit and Dimple enter a community of like-minded Indians centered around the performativity of both American and Indian culture, as with Jyoti Sen’s Bollywood costuming. The inability to adequately perform either of these cultures
results in moments of terrible confusion. These moments offer the true, visceral experience of the immigrant, the difficult negotiation between two cultures. The immigrant community in Wife, however, quickly quells these moments that meld past and present and promise change in the individual. When Meena Sen admits that she suffers from headaches when trying to understand native English-speakers, the admission of inadequacy filled the air, and Jyoti quickly moves the conversation away from his wife’s confession. At that moment of inadequacy, Meena no longer performs; she experiences the confusion of an immigrant in a new culture with a new language to learn. Though brief, this scene gives us a rare view of another immigrant experiencing the alienation Dimple felt when trying to buy cheesecake. So careful are they to preserve their insular community and perform their Indian pasts, the Indian characters remaining static and unwilling to negotiate cultures into something new and American. Americanization, for these characters, means the discarding of Indian culture for an American replacement, which uses the logic of assimilation. Ina Mullick, the Indian immigrant whom the Indian community regards as more American than the Americans, “theorizes the great moral and physical change of American immigration as the Before and After, which formulates immigrant identity in temporal and exclusive terms. Ina represents the After while Dimple remarks, I’m always a Before…I guess I’ve never been an After” (95). Dimple’s present tense, coupled with the eternal always, implies continuity rather than successive stages of identity. Because Dimple asserts her before status in America, she unconsciously breaks down the
spatial barriers of India and America and regards her identity as continuous rather than a series of cultural identities, of Before and Afters.

Despite her Indian origins, Ina, the typical American, does not exemplify fusion or hybridity. She performs her Americanization, no longer a process but an adopted fact; as a process, it would infer constant negotiation between two or more present cultures. Ina’s theory replaces one with the other, leaving neither time nor space for such negotiation: Ina has this 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. According to Ina, the immigrant must expel India; completely sever the past from the present, in order to assume an American identity. Furthermore, once the immigrant has removed the past, she can no longer retrieve it. For Ina, this process becomes a succession of supplemental cultures that are ultimately separable and distinguishable from each other and from the self. Separating India and America so completely simultaneously upholds the differences espoused by multiculturalism and encourages constant comparison between cultures rather than fusion.

I must emphasize here how these cultural distinctions result from Ina, who has been influenced by the macrocosmic multiculturalism of the nation. Anindyo Roy indicts Mukherjee for attempting to clear a space for her aesthetics in order to posit a system of easily recognizable forms of identity and difference. ‘These forms are clearly indicative of the stabilization and co-modification of a colonized
culture by a postcolonial writer whose own authorial gaze corresponds to that of
the Orientalizing West.

While we cannot (and should not) so easily dismiss arguments that expose
Mukherjee’s Western affiliations and ideals, Roy fails to consider how she creates
characters who support and enable this system. Intentionally, her characters
dramatize difference, and Mukherjee can thus write their performances ironically
in order to critique the multicultural system they support. She illuminates an
American culture clearly indicative of instability that needs an immigrant
subjectivity to revitalize it, to reinstate the individualism at the core of American
mythology. In Dimple, Mukherjee presents an immigrant who unconsciously
considers herself a continuous individual, not one composed of a succession of
cultural identities. But the pressures of multicultural America prevent her from
claiming a personal past and lead her to strive to maintain an (impossible)
distinction between India and America, often through force and violence. Soon
into her marriage, before she has moved to America, Dimple discovers that she is
pregnant. Rather than seeing the development positively, as proof that she can
fulfill her wifely duties and please her husband with a child, Dimple gave vicious
squeezes to her stomach as if to force a vile thing out of hiding. She takes pleasure
in the associated vomiting, delighting in the violent expulsion of an element from
her body as a substitute for her desire to discharge the child. She refuses to name
or identify the child, only angrily dismissing it as evidence of the unfairness of
wifehood and her helplessness. Temporarily, Dimple displaces the rage she feels
for her baby onto external objects. In a fit of rage, she beats the baby clothes her mother-in-law had sewn, inadvertently injuring a mouse hidden within the folds. Seeing the bleeding mouse leave the garment pile, she chases it, screaming as a woman transformed. And in an outburst of hatred, her body shuddering, her wrist taut with fury, she smashed the top of a small gray head. Upon closer inspection, the dead mouse looks pregnant. Here, Dimple enacts her rage and asserts herself, legitimating her emotions and individuality. Dimple ultimately succeeds in skipping her way to abortion, jumping rope until she forces a miscarriage. More than impeding her rights as an individual, the baby cluttered up the preparation for going abroad. She did not want to carry any relics from her old life. A child would serve as a reminder of the past; growing up in a new country to immigrant parents, the child has the potential to truly hybridize the two cultures and assimilate with more ease than Dimple or Amit could. The baby would serve as a reminder of the Old World, the India that the couple intends to leave behind. For these characters, especially for Dimple, an immigrant must completely distinguish between places of origin and destination, thereby rendering India and America mutually exclusive categories. The abortion coincides with arrival of the news that Amit and Dimple could move to the United States; Dimple is still recovering in the hospital when Amit learns of their impending immigration. Only with the removal of obstacles wholly reminiscent of India like a child who does not yet have the capacity to perform. American can they embark on a new life. In order for their immigration to succeed, Dimple believes that everything has to be brand-
new. That’s essential. The need for such visceral violence to divide the two
cultures foregrounds Mukherjee’s distrust of multiculturalism, its emphasis of
difference and its inability to allow fusion. Dimple quells her violent energy in
America, leaving it behind as an aspect of a former self. She passively accepts the
confusions of the new world around her, trying to interpret the immigrant
community of Jyoti Sen and his Indian acquaintances. The violence Dimple
encounters in America directs itself at her (as in the case of the Jewish
delicatessen) rather than emanating from her. While the violence of vomiting or
killing pleased her in India, hostility originating from an external source proves
disturbing. Television exposes Dimple to American news broadcasts and fictional
soap operas through which she realizes that talking about murders in America was
like talking about the weather. The ubiquity of these reports and the discussion of
violence in small talk situations eventually desensitize Dimple to that particular
kind of aggression; she accepts it as part of American culture and performs it with
appropriate flippancy.

Accepting American culture via television and the media effectively equals
accepting a cultural idealization, much like Jyoti’s Bollywood attire presents an
Indian performance. Confronting external violence in human form, however,
proves more difficult for Dimple, for in the fallibility of humanity the
impossibility of people to actually meet the standards of an idealized culture or
perfectly perform American lies the potential for destroying the multicultural
boundaries Dimple has established. When Ina Mullick brings her radical American
friend Leni Anspach to Dimple’s apartment, they enter into a heated argument, and Leni breaks an ashtray in anger. Later, Ina throws a pillow and breaks the homeowner’s vase. The other women’s spontaneous aggression threatens Dimple most. Girls like Ina and Leni broke too many things, Dimple reflected. They didn’t kill things the way Dimple did deliberately, excitedly and they didn’t let things die and things didn’t just die on them accidentally. They killed randomly through some principle of intolerance and profound detachment that Dimple could only think of as American, and beyond her. Spontaneity implies identification with emotion or, if this violence is a product of culture, Americanness that allows no room for the deliberation needed for performativity. The Americanness that Dimple identifies differs from the idealized culture she sees on the television; instead, Ina and Leni’s America welcomes the individuality of expression, even violent expression. They force Dimple to confront the disjuncture between the real and illusory. Intolerance for the simple sake of intolerance may not offer the best representation of American culture, but even as negatively as Dimple perceives these women’s actions, the detachment from any cultural conceptions of the American norm liberates the individual. Here, Mukherjee presents America as a space that permits such self-assertion, however negative the potential consequences. Mukherjee does not suggest that individuality can only exist when completely detached from culture because that would result in the same problem as separating two cultures so completely from one another.
The problem lies with allowing cultural identity to overpower individual identity, to lose the person in the struggle for ethnic validity. The United States, because of its youth and immigrant foundations, provides a space wherein one has the potential to fuse both individualism and culture personal history and past history. When seeking to completely obliterate her Indian past by aborting her child and moving to the U.S., Dimple also seeks to distance herself from her personal past as though it were only a figment of her culture rather than fundamental to her identity. In her reflection of Ina and Leni’s destructive habits, Dimple misrepresents herself, for she figures her acts of violence as deliberate and lacking in the other women’s spontaneity and intolerance. Her attack on the mouse in India and her miscarriage, however, are the products of an intolerable situation her trappings in traditional Indian wifehood, itself a product of a cultural history that (as Dimple sees it) privileges the group over the individual. Dimple’s realization of this privileging comes soon after her marriage when she moves into her husband’s family home and under the thumb of her mother-in-law.

Dimple resents that she cannot decorate her own room, and she learns quickly that he native expectations that marriage was supposed to be the best part of getting married: being free and expressing yourself did not match the reality of an India that suppressed the individual in favor of communal tradition. In fact, the exigence for this novel comes partly from Mukherjee’s return to India, her discussions with married friends, and her frustration with the conditions women face in matrimonial Indian roles: “I was writing a second novel, Wife, at the time,
about a young Bengali wife who was sensitive enough to feel the pain, but not intelligent enough to make sense out of her situation and break out. The anger that young wives around me were trying so hard to hide had become my anger. And that anger washed over the manuscript. I wrote what I hoped would be a wounding novel” (268). Though Mukherjee intended that the manuscript as a whole should indict a cultural practice, she displaces her anger onto Dimple and shows how her character, the wife, can not only be wounded but can wound. While she had tried to end her pregnancy deliberately, the mouse Dimple attacked surprised her and the chase that ensued showed no evidence of planning. In defining violence in the cultural terms of America or India rather than in herself, Dimple tries to maintain a distinction between cultures. She cannot accept the multifariousness of violence even in herself. Dimple dismisses or neglects the spontaneous aggression of the mouse incident because it happened in India. Once she immigrates, she casts off her past as a means of distinguishing between her past and her present in America. The rise in violence in Dimple’s character climaxes with the death of the mouse and of her child; had she not forcefully discarded remnants of her past with the fetus and the move, her private violence may have escalated and become public. When in America, she placates her violent tendencies and suppresses her individuality for the sake of cultural performativity the role of dutiful immigrant wife.

As her time in America unfolds, Dimple begins to realize the impossibility of separating past and present, India and America, as the society dictates.
Realizing the futility of her situation, of accepting a cultural role that overshadows her identity, the unfairness of what life had done to her overwhelmed Dimple. There would be no thrilling demolitions, merely substitutions. She had used violence in India to express her aversion to her circumstances. Despite the misguided nature of her aversion her desire to create distinction between India and America the violence asserts individuality by either destruction, as with the abortion, or fusion, expressed in sexuality. At first, when Dimple allows the violence to resurface with fantasies of Amit’s and her deaths, her own intensity shocked her she had not considered herself susceptible to violence so she tried to explain it away as unnatural sexual desire. Dimple reads sex as a violent act, for it imposed a child on her that she did not want. In America, she and Amit occupy a home left by the Mookerjis, a couple consisting of an Indian man and an American woman on sabbatical. Dimple cannot ignore the implications of the Mookerjis’ matrimonial and sexual union, the biological hybridization of cultures. Though still distinguishable as two different people and representatives of distinct cultures, the Mookerji union amalgamates them, and their home serves as a constant reminder of fusion. As she encounters more Americans in this home, Dimple begins to realize the impossibility of maintaining multicultural distinctions, and her violence mounts. She abandons the need to demolish and seeks to force hybridization by sleeping with Milt Glasser, Ina’s American friend. Dimple’s affair with Milt, however, works as a metaphor for multiculturalism, for it seeks to substitute her Indian marriage with an American relationship, to
supplement one culture for the other and therefore maintain the distinction between the two. She identifies Milt as the quintessential American with whom she can engage in meaningless small talk; he knows how to squeeze money from the government, considers himself a jack of all trades, and has a number of vague plans and contacts that imply possibility. He was, to her, America. If Milt is America, then Dimple believes she can relieve her distress by sleeping with him, thereby adopting his culture and discarding her own. Dimple envisions their affair as the fictionalized play of television. After sex, Milt lounges on the sofa as Dimple sits awkwardly nearby. She wants to punish him for disrupting her romantic illusions. She wanted to jolt him, accidentally, of course, so that he could witness her agony. He had no right to read the paper and spoil beautiful endings. After sex, the two remain disparate, seated at opposite ends of the couch. Their intercourse failed to offer Dimple unity in the way she had imagined or hoped. Because it remains rooted in and maintains multicultural difference, the affair ultimately solves nothing; Dimple’s violence continues to intensify and consume her. Though she had fantasized about death and killing for months, Dimple decides to murder her husband spontaneously, with the kind of immediacy she recognized as distinctly American in Ina and Leni. Although brief, the murder scene that ends the novel provides a last, concise glimpse into the pain of immigration and the radical violence and consequences necessary for the individual to assert herself. Amit chastises Dimple for spending too much money, for not behaving as a wife should. Knife in hand, Dimple approaches Amit by
appropriating and performing the role of dutiful wife and tricking Amit into thinking that the circle she traces around his mole is an expression of sexual desire rather than outlining a target. However, Dimple’s newfound consciousness of her performance finally enables her to realize her agency and assert herself; she abandons all convention, dissolving into a stream of consciousness as she stabs Amit seven times. She deludes herself into thinking that the action proves the completion of her Americanization, for she has merely adopted the fiction of America: Women on television got away with murder.

The novel ends with this dissolution into insanity and illusion, but Mukherjee has more invested in *Wife* than just a cautionary tale of believing and performing cultural identities. We should not consider the murder itself a positive development, as some critics imply Mukherjee intends. Brinda Bose suggests that for Dimple (as well as for Jasmine in Mukherjee’s next novel), murder evolves into an acceptable signifier for discarding nostalgia and starting over; it is neither the end nor even merely the means to an end. It is a beginning. Once the home country (represented by Amit) has been relegated to the recesses of rejected memory, and the new life is looked forward to with hope, the process of defining a new identity can begin. Bose’s totalizing criticism, however, assumes difference between home-country and new country and supposes that one can reject a past, breaking cleanly between past and present. We receive no indication that Amit’s murder suggests a beginning, if only because it ends the novel and leaves Dimple deranged. Because she falls to such a state of insanity and loses all self possession,
we cannot consider this murder parallel to her abortion, either. For Dimple, ending her pregnancy implies the possibility of a new life completely devoid of vestiges of India, but her entire stay in America shows us the impossibility of that distinction. In killing Amit, Dimple offers no (misguided) hope for a new beginning; the act results from disappointment as she realizes that she cannot perform America either by having sex with an American or in marriage to Amit. Dimple does not wholly fail, though, because she acts and asserts her individuality apart from the role governed by a cultural history: Individual initiative, that’s what it came down to, she finally realizes, and her life had been devoted only to pleasing others, not herself. In acting, Dimple grounds her identity in America, for despite its multiculturalism, Mukherjee still considers America the space most welcoming to transformation. Mukherjee acknowledges that Dimple’s immigration has been one of misguided Americanization, but in the end Dimple finally transforms not into an Indian in America, nor into an American, but into an American with an Indian past.

Through accepting the violence of her past in India and engaging with the same person she had been as she kills Amit, Dimple establishes a continual self, one fully integrated into both India and America. She reclaims the origins of her own identity. Dimple’s journey shows the degree to which the histories are entwined and inseparable. In considering Dimple’s accomplishment in the face of her tragedy, we need not lose sight of the distinctiveness of American writing that Mukherjee seeks to establish. Mukherjee provides America as the space in which
these entanglements can come to light for characters to wrestle with, even if the struggle results in violence and irresolution. Such is the immigrant situation, particularly in America. By identifying the United States as a place of potential transformation, Mukherjee solidifies the boundaries of the nation, creating an insular world wherein the central conflict of multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s resonates as a distinctly national problem. She conceives the characters in *Wife* as immigrants because they must cross national lines and grapple with an already existing national discourse. Writing about immigrants, then, necessitates a project of writing about a nation, and vice versa, because for Mukherjee writing a text means writing a cultural context as well, in the sense that text and context merge to constitute an environment for freedom and creativity. As long as the conception of America remains so fixed, its internal conflicts even (multi)cultural ones will remain problematic and destructive for the American immigrant. By creating a novel in which a character like Dimple *can* attain freedom and creativity in a national space which champions these ideals, Mukherjee allows communal and personal pasts to converge in ways that can possibly liberate a globalized subject.