

# 文化的構成概念としてのWIFE : Bharati Mukherjee の *Wife* における立場と地位

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WIFE as a Cultural Construct: Place and Position in Bharati  
Mukherjee's *Wife*

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“Wife” is generally defined as “a woman joined to a man by marriage,” and it is a term often used with adjective good, ideal or bad. “Wife” is also used with endings, as in wifeship, wifedom, wifehood, which are the state or quality of wife. So it may be said that wife is a culturally constructed concept.

In this paper, a short story, *Wife*, by an American writer of Indo origin will be examined as the crossroads of race and gender, focusing on the passage regarding food, and Kosher law. Food related situations work effectively to illustrate wife as a cultural construct.

Keywords : Cultural Construct, Wife, Kosher law, Race, Gender

## 0. Introduction

I would like to start my paper with the following question to myself: why “race” and gender; not ethnicity and gender; nor religious community and gender? Is this because American literature or society considers “race” the main concern?

Race is said not something innate to nature; it is a construct created by people, varying in expression from culture to culture. Gender is also constructed by society with elaborate aspects, such as associated assumptions, stereotypes and social or cultural expectations. Gender extends the very basic differences male and female into its roles involving work, home, other activities and interactions through society and culture. Although it sounds the same as “culture”, according

to cultural anthropologists, “a cultural construct”<sup>1</sup> is a specific belief or understanding about something in the society either it is natural or not. Therefore, I would like to use the term “cultural construct” to define race and gender in this paper. “A cultural construct” is a common understanding of a certain aspect of the society. That aspect exists because the people of a specific culture; in this case, India and the US, believe that thing or entity to exist.

“Wife” is generally defined as “a woman joined to a man by marriage,” and it’s a term often used with adjective “good” “ideal” or “bad.” Even in Japanese, we have such words as RYOSAI, a good wife and AKUSAI, a bad wife, which means it is a very judgmental word itself, and differs in each individual culture: “wife” is also used with endings, as in wifeship, wifedom, wifehood which are the state or quality of wife. So it can be said that wife is a culturally constructed concept. One of my good friends from the Philippines said the other day, “I am an educator. But before that, I am his WIFE and it is my responsibility to manage his health” meaning she has a vivid image of a good wife.

In this paper, I will briefly introduce the background of Mukherjee and her novel *Wife*, which is not only about immigration, but also about gender, race, place and/or position. I would like to particularly focus on the passage regarding food, and Kosher law<sup>2</sup>. This is because not only in India but in Asia we used to equate a good wife to a good cook. Food related situations work effectively to illustrate wife as a cultural construct.

## 1. Background

Bharati Mukherjee is a writer who investigates through her fiction the meaning of culture for immigrants. Concerns related to female antagonists are central to the vision of Mukherjee in *Wife* as its title indicates. *Wife*, published in 1975, is Mukherjee’s second novel. The story traces the experiences of a young middle-class immigrant wife, Dimple Dagsputa, from Calcutta, India to New York City. She dreams of becoming a Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legend, but she fails in the end.

While writing this novel, *Wife*, Mukherjee experienced horrifying racism in

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<sup>1</sup>Janeen Arnold Costa mentions in her discussion, “Discussant Comments Gender Issues: Gender As a Cultural Construct”, as “Gender is a cultural construct of elaborate dimensions.”

<sup>2</sup>According to the law, all kosher milk products must derive from kosher animals. In addition, the milk of impure cattle and game (e.g. donkey milk) is prohibited. Dairy products may not contain non-kosher additives, and they may not include meat products or derivatives for example, many types of cheese are manufactured with animal fats. Additionally, a number of pre-processed foods contain small portions of milk products, such as whey.

Canada, particularly in Toronto, and claims that “the nominal setting is Calcutta and New York City. But in the mind of Dimple, it is always Toronto” (39). Mukherjee’s well-known essay, “An Invisible Woman” (1981), describes her experience in Canada as one that created “double vision” (39). Mukherjee left Toronto, and Canada, because she was unable to keep her “twin halves” together (40). Mukherjee’s work provides entry points into interlocking structures of domination; the diasporic female subject in Mukherjee’s *Wife* struggles to translate this powerful structure in her attempt to move across national borders and cultural differences. “An Invisible Woman” illuminates the issues that are at stake in Mukherjee’s *Wife*. The protagonist Dimple, like Mukherjee, experiences an identity crisis through the cultural constructs that powerfully shape her self-perception and deny her access to control of her own life. *Wife* is also about Dimple’s ability to grasp at power through the connections that she establishes between a cultural construct (wife) and biology (female), despite the American social forces that attempt to divide her.

At a discussion in Japan, Mukherjee appraised the novel as a model of good fiction to demonstrate one’s mental condition and social problems. She explains the social situation in the U.S., and the protagonist’s mental situation, and her own state of unease in Canada at the time when she created the novel:

… the fiction that I wrote reflects some of the unease that I felt … it’s about a character who could be a little like me except that she comes to the early 70s New York when most Americans didn’t think of South Asians as immigrants. They thought that foreign students … get their degrees and go home. But the beginning of the South Asian wave of migrants was happening and so this is the story of a bride … of a Bengali engineer to New York and who’s given to—this is pre-Prozac days—so she’s given to despair, to loneliness, to watching too much television. (“Talk by Mukherjee in Nagoya”)<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Tara in *The Tiger’s Daughter*, Mukherjee’s first novel, Dimple always depends upon something or someone. This is because she has been trained and tamed to be obedient to the customary Indian rules and notions. One of the examples of Dimple’s total dependence upon someone can be seen in the following scene:

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<sup>3</sup> This part of talk by Mukherjee at American Center in Nagoya has been published as a part of Appendix of the current author’s dissertation.

[Dimple] tried not to look directly at [Jyoti]—no one had told her how to behave with a husband’s friend in pajamas in the middle of the night… (99)

She does not know what to do when something happens beyond her knowledge obtained from traditional Indian education, which is far from the free ideals espoused in education. Even her college education is for the sake of a better marriage which she believes may bring her freedom and love. Her dream to get freedom and love from a marriage, however, would be so difficult for Dimple because it is a Bengali marriage which refrains and restrains any expectation from a marriage.

She realizes no hope exists in her marriage as long as she is in India, because of her mother-in-law’s stringent commands (18). Before coming to feel miserable she has already thought of “herself as someone going into exile” (16). She believes that America will relieve her suffering from oppression in India and her ray of hope is fixed on immigration, even though it is not her own decision. Again, Dimple depends upon relocation and immigration to obtain a new role in a new cultural space.

Mukherjee prepares two opposite locations and cultures for Dimple: sandy Calcutta and modern New York City, not Texas or Iowa. Her immigration in the U.S., however, does not function well as a remedy as long as she lives with her Indian husband and keeps her position as a wife.

## 2. **Wife, food and Male, kosher law**

Dimple as a wife has to go through the incredible confusions that new female immigrants experience on arrival in a new space. The following is one of those confused situations that she experiences:

“My law. God’s law.” He presented a blood-smudged sigh in a language she’d never seen. “If I wanted to break God’s law, I’d sell you cheesecake. But you see that sign in the window, right under ‘Schwartz’s’? Look at it good, lady, and don’t ever come into a shop like it and ask for cheesecake.” His face was red, and the blood-smudged card was shaking under her nose. (59)

When she goes out with another Indian married woman, she runs into trouble because she doesn’t know that all white men don’t have the same religion, same background, and she’s never heard of kosher, of kosher laws, where there are food laws for Jewish Americans. Mukherjee uses the same part in her talk in Nagoya

in order to demonstrate how to describe social problems, and the conflicts between Indian and American cultures, and also between traditional and modern cultures.

Law is something you have to obey; in this sense it is related to a husband. Dimple must negotiate the web woven by gender and race in her Bengali culture with a multiple inseparable positions in American culture.

Mukherjee said that the novel written based upon her Canadian experience is “a wounding novel” with her problem on racism: “how could I explain this anger to critics in New York or Montreal” (*Days and Nights in Calcutta* 268). Her mental condition can be read through the book:

How could she live in a country where she could not predict these basic patterns, where every other woman was a stranger, where she felt different, ignorant, exposed to ridicule in the elevator? (112)

In the story, Mukherjee, unlike in American trilogy, *Jasmine, the Holder of the World, and Leave It to Me*, does not show its heroine’s eagerness to transform in order to be an immigrant and to stay in the country. Instead, she illustrates uneasiness towards living in the country. That is because the real setting is always located in Toronto.

*Wife* has also been read as providing the metaphors for the fractional selves: the horror implicit in self division is an element to make Dimple’s character beset with paranoia as a consequence of alienation and confusion. Dimple, as a woman without a sense of safety, “may project a pseudo-community of persecutors which takes the place of ‘real’ object relations. To be persecuted is to be noticed and is, therefore, to exist” (Waugh 188). Waugh also points to “frail ego boundaries and ... cultural devaluation” as causes for the paranoid imagination (Waugh 188-189). These elements in the novel work well to disclose the forces toward Dimple’s breakdown. However, Mukherjee’s complex social critique, introduced as parody, ties the novel firmly with reality: references to women’s financial dependence, suicide, and the insistent note that “education gets in the way of husband worship” in the novel (*Days and Nights in Calcutta*, 266).

Mukherjee rejects the sarcastic reviews from American feminist critics, who blamed the novel for showing female passivity and cited it as a book that has “to be killed” (Connell 22). Mukherjee also says in *Days and Nights in Calcutta* that her anger and frustration with the fate of traditional Indian wives underlies *Wife*. During her stay in Calcutta, she was faced with the lives of women from her own caste whose choices had been more limited than hers. After the encounter with Meena, a young wife who was studying in a teaching course against her family’s

will, Mukherjee makes Meena's difficulty her own story and her own voice for those who have no way to show their anger. Mukherjee explains her way of showing the anger as follows:

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.

There was only one problem, my problem; how could I explain this anger to critics in New York or Montreal who did not know that a young Bengali woman could rebel by simply reading a book or refusing to fast?

(*Days and Nights in Calcutta*, 268)

The anger, bitterness and mental disorder of Mukherjee's Canadian life, have found their way into the novel's heroine Dimple in effective ways. At the same time, critics saw her as an unpleasant activist and even named her "Miss Mean-Mouth" (Connell 22). It is ironic that this novel which helped her conquer her bitterness and discover the writing process as a way to release anger and exact literary revenge on Canada caused her to be seen as an upset exile running from Canada to the U.S.

Dimple keeps a "slight surface depression" (*Oxford English Dictionary*; epigraph to *Wife*), just as her name implies, a "slight disturbance" (Hancock 42). She cannot show her anger in an effective way. As a "wounding novel," *Wife* is the story of a wife, "sensitive enough to feel the pain, but not intelligent enough to make sense out of her situation and break out" (*Days and Nights in Calcutta*, 268). She is the ideal heroine with the ideal background for Mukherjee's story of expatriate and change, not immigration nor transformation. That means Dimple has not completely transformed into another identity. Dimple is yet an immature forerunner for the future heroines of Mukherjee's novels, so Dimple's experiences seem too depressing and miscarrying. She is too nervous to go beyond the boundaries of her original culture as well as culturally constructed role of wife without going crazy and killing her husband. When she acquires a little freedom and a new role as the expatriate wife in New York, with her unstable sense of self, there is no possibility that she can prevent herself from going mad.

### 3. Conclusion

Concerning the process of transformation that Mukherjee has been focusing on in her creative writing, *Wife* claims that a young Indian woman of Dimple's

caste background has no expectation of transformation into an independent and developed person, and will not find a meaning of her own outside the socially and culturally given framework of marriage. As described in *Wife*, woman's happiness and survival depend upon her choice of husband. Blaise, Mukherjee's husband, comments on the marriage chance of Indian women without such chances as Dimple that she "may end up—for she cannot refuse to marry—with a lout who will not tolerate the slightest deviation from expectancy, or the most pathetic gestures toward self-expression" (*Days and Nights in Calcutta*, 141). Girls are, therefore, brought up to be wives in order to find suitable husbands. Dimple misunderstands her culture's expectations as her own. Her simple estimate of herself as a wife prevents her from having any desire of her own. Her dowry and appearance define her social worth when choosing a husband and future life.

Dimple voluntarily assumes a weak position in pursuit of marriage. Immigration to a new culture does not offer the freedom to rediscover herself or to reconstruct a new identity but puts pressure on to fit in with new demands; then she comes to lose herself. She asks herself if there is any possibility to break out of her false circle and to save herself. However, Dimple fails to be a good wife, since she has been taught only to emulate role models. A role of wife is culturally constructed only to be imitated, copying rather than truly living. Dimple ends in a state of uprooting from body, mind and society. Dimple's progress from expected wifeness to discarded selfhood is at the center of the novel, wherein lies Mukherjee's anger toward women's unquestioned fate that society and culture make them believe in.

Mukherjee's understanding of adaptation and assimilation is not negating but merging cultural constructs. There have been a lot of discussion on the end of the story, but if she attempts to negate her role as wife, Dimple will get divorced so that she will leave a role of wife for herself. I think this ending meets Mukherjee's intention.

### Notes

\*Some part of this paper was presented at the International Symposium "American Literature and Culture at the Crossroads of Race and Gender" held at Nagoya University on March 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

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