The Obstacles Encountered by Immigrants and their Cultural Assimilation in Bharathi Mukherjee's Short Story "A Wife's Story"

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Abstract
While replacing to a new country can be a wonderful experience, there are many challenges and adjustments required. Language barriers, cultural adjustment, job opportunities, education access, financial instability, and lack of family support are a few of these. Migration often causes conflict when cultures clash. However, migration has many positive cultural effects on both the migrants and the local population in the areas where they settle. Migration is a double-edged sword for migrants. Whether or not they choose to migrate, they are unlikely to wish to lose their culture. When immigrants to the US move out of ethnic communities and into more broadly defined "American" spaces, they could try to put their memories of their home countries behind them in favour of "becoming American." In the past, they discovered that assimilation aided in their access to homes, employment, education, and other resources."A Wife's Story" was included in Bharati Mukherjee's 1988 National Book Critics Circle Award-winning The Middleman and Other Stories. Since then, it has been included in several feminist and international literary anthologies featuring short fiction. Like many of Mukherjee's writings, the story explores the nuanced and frequently contradictory experiences of South Asian immigrants adjusting to life in the United States. It also covers how other immigrant groups and Americans, some of whom have only been in the country for a generation or two, have reacted to these South Asians, who Mukherjee refers to as "the new pioneers."The short story "A Wife's Story" centres on the experiences of an immigrant Indian woman to the United States. The story is told from Panna's point of view, which is the protagonist and faces difficulties promoting into a new culture and evolving as a person. Examining the intricacies of identity, marriage, and adaptation, this is a gripping account of the cultural and personal changes that an Indian woman in the US went through.

Keywords: Identity, Adaptation, Migration, Immigrants, and Cultural Assimilation

Humanity cannot exist without migration, which always has an impact on both the migratory population and the cultural environments they live in. Migration modifies the cultures of both the migrants and the destinations they end up in through cultural diffusion. Conflict results from migration when cultures have a collision. However, migration has many positive cultural effects on both the migrants and the local population in the areas where they settle.

In the past, migrants have experienced discrimination and persecution in numerous areas where they are a minority.

Assimilation is the process by which migrants, and especially their offspring, if permitted, acquire the characteristics of the new culture or cultures. But they run the risk of losing their own cultural characteristics if they do this. This is especially dangerous if the entire culture was forced to leave its native country and is now living in a diaspora. It is possible for migrants to lose their sense of self without fully assimilating into the new, dominant culture. They might feel as though they are in the middle, neither fully assimilated into their mother country's nor their homeland's culture, and they might even be despised or rejected by both.

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the finest Indian diasporic writers who deals with the "phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates" as well as on Indian women and their struggle. She is an Indian-born American novelist and short-story writer who delineated in her writing the cultural changes and alienation in the immigrant experience. She also explored the internal culture clashes of her immigrant characters in the award-winning collection The Middleman and Other Stories. In many of her novels and stories, a young woman — shaped, as she was, by a patriarchal culture — strikes out for the unknown, sometimes by choice and sometimes not. In the existential crisis that ensues, a new self emerges — or a series of selves, with multiple answers to the question "Who am I?"

In The Middleman and Other Stories (1988), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, Mukherjee served up the immigrant experience in all its rich variety, told through the voices of newcomers from the South-Asian, the Caribbean, the Middle East, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, all of them both daunted and intoxicated by the strange possibilities of life in the United States.

Bharati Mukherjee's "A Wife's Story" was published in The Middleman and Other Stories (1988). It is a short story that revolves around the experiences of an Indian woman who has immigrated to the United States. The narrative is presented from the perspective of the protagonist, Panna Bhatt, as she grapples with the challenges of adjusting to a new culture and the changes in her personal identity.

''A Wife's Story" is told from the first-person perspective of Panna Bhatt, a middle-aged woman who has left India and her husband for two years after their son's death to study on scholarship for a doctorate in special education in New York City. She interacts with three other non-American characters; each of them profoundly challenges her sense of self.

As Panna navigates the complexities of her new life, Mukherjee delves into themes of cultural clash, the impact of immigration on personal identity, and the evolving dynamics within a marriage. The narrative captures the tension between tradition and modernity, offering a poignant exploration of the immigrant experience and the challenges faced by women in negotiating their roles in a new cultural context.

The narrator Panna Bhatt is an Indian female. She plans to write to playwright David Mamet about the content of his plays that are offensive to Indian women. His plays are also racist, portraying Indians as stingy and ugly. In India, she thinks, this would not have been accepted. She is at the play with Imre, a Hungarian refugee who's English is not very good. He is very protective of women. She met him in a seminar on special education last semester. He is married with two children and is petitioning for their emigration. She too is married- her husband is in India.

Her husband name is nameless. In India, husband's names are not called by the wives.

"Who can tell the difference in a traditional marriage in which a wife still doesn't call her husband by his first name?"

He manages a mill two hundred miles north of Bombay. Imre does not understand why she is so upset and advises her to relax.

Panna mentions that her son has died. Her marriage was arranged. She feels light, almost free. She is in New York getting a Ph.D. in special education. She has a small scholarship. She has a family history of beatings. She feels a small victory for Indian Americans- that they must have "made it", since American art is no longer condescending to Indians. Her roommate Charity Chin, an Asian girl who is a hands model, is quite a character. Charity says, "Orientals are supposed to have a monopoly in the hands modelling business".

Panna exchanges partners frequently. Charity asks her for advice regarding Eric, Charity's estranged husband's asking Charity for money. Charity's current boyfriend Phil is a very nervous flutist. When Phil comes over, he bakes and cleans, and seems feminine to the narrator. The narrator notes that Charity has ambitions that would not have been realistic in India. In India, she would be a flat-chested old maid. Charity lives extravagantly, whereas the narrator lives modestly.

Suddenly the narrator feels about the love while watching the lovers- Charity and Phil. She said, "Love is a commodity, hoarded like any other". Charity knows that Panna's marriage was a traditional Hindu marriage. She got married with the help of a marriage broker who was her mother's cousin, picked a groom for her.

One night her husband calls her from Ahmadabad, a town of textile mills north of Bombay. He is a vice president at Lakshmi Cotton Mills. Here the writer mentions the Indian culture and the beliefs of the very Indians. The name of the company is Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, but LCM (Pvt) Ltd, is doing poorly. He tells him about a firebombing of a truck that belongs to his business, which resulted in the death of three people. She knows how he feels but cannot entirely sympathize- she feels detached from life in India. He tells her he misses her, and she tells him the same, somewhat mechanically. He tells her he is coming to visit her in New York. Her husband acts a little needy.

"Then his voice breaks. He says he needs me, he misses me,
he wants me to come to him damp from my evening shower,
smelling of sandalwood soap, my braid decorated with jasmines."

Here Mukherjee expresses how the Indian women are forced to have a relationship with their husbands without their wives' desire. "Tell me you need me. Panna, please tell me again", says by Panna's husband.

Panna changes out of pants into a sari and jewellery to greet her husband at the airport. He notices immediately that she is not wearing a ring given to Panna by his mother. He is upset that she doesn't comment on his new glasses, and that she handles the money. "You've said nothing about my new glasses". Her husband becomes seduced by commercialism and consumerism, buying extravagantly.

They go on a tour of New York and her husband is appalled by the free manner in which she speaks to men. He is also irritated by the tour guide, who sings instead of providing sightseeing information. When a European tourist snaps pictures of her as an artifact, she feels lost and embarrassed that she is behaving like a tourist herself. Her husband, however, is thrilled with the cityscapes. She thinks a lot about Imre, in a non-romantic way, while she is with her husband.

"It's only been a week, but I feel as though I am really
seeing him for the first time. The yellow hair worn very
short at the sides, the wide, narrow lips. He's a good-looking
man, but self-conscious, almost arrogant".

Panna organizes an evening out with Imre and her husband, revealing their contrasting preferences in entertainment.

Imre opts for an avant-garde French film, while her husband chooses the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall.

He is preoccupied with spending money, having paid steep prices on the black market in India for American dollars. Seeking small electronic gadgets to smuggle into India, he contemplates bringing back a microwave oven to replace the family cook.

On the tenth day of their visit, the husband plans a sightseeing tour, meticulously selecting the company offering the most sites for the least cost. He sends Panna alone to buy tickets at the tour office, aware that Americans might struggle with his accent. The ticket seller, possibly Middle Eastern, crudely propositions Panna. "Come on, doll, make my day!" Her husband, expecting such behaviour, reveals his racial prejudice and chauvinistic attitude by blaming her for the incident, stating,

"I told you not to wear pants. He thinks you are Puerto Rican.
He thinks he can treat you with disrespect."

Perhaps he believes that if she had worn Indian clothing, the situation would not have arisen. While on the ferry to the Statue of Liberty, her husband asks her to take a picture of him with the World Trade Centre in the background. When she struggles with the camera, a bearded man, who is also an immigrant and a photographer, offers assistance. He snaps the picture and suggests buying her a beer, which she politely declines.

Their outing disappoints both, as the Statue of Liberty is closed for repairs and the snack bar is dirty and expensive. Amid other tourists and pigeons, her husband presses her about the photographer's words. As she invents a response, he abruptly insists they return to India immediately, claiming he's observed how other men look at her. She reminds him of her studies, though inwardly doubts she will ever use her degree.

Their tense conversation is interrupted by a little girl kicking a bottle cap toward the husband, and the pigeons' cries. Quickly changing the subject, he complains they were cheated on the tour, as it charged extra for the ferry trip. He concludes that New York is as deceitful as Bombay.

That night, they receive a phone call. He hands the phone to Panna, complaining, "I am not understanding these Negro people's accent." Oblivious to his own accent and misuse of English, the message is a cable from his boss in India instructing him to return due to labour violence at the textile mill. When he decides to leave the next day, Panna reminds him it's not his mill and he's on vacation. Touched by her concern, despite her refusal to accompany him, he embraces her and begins undressing her. He rushes to administer "American rites: deodorants, fragrances" before they continue their evening.

As she waits, catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror—naked, shameless, "free, afloat, watching somebody else"—Panna reflects on her story. As she glories in her beautiful body and her freedom, one is haunted by the question of the price and texture of her freedom. "A Wife's Story", like many of the other stories by Mukherjee, leaves the narrative unresolved and open for discussion. It also raises important questions about the forging of cultural, national and sexual alliances in a United States that glorifies individual freedom and urges the loss of a racial and ethnic memory that is not Eurocentric.

Panna is an intelligent, initially melancholic woman who gains disconcerting insights into herself, her marriage, and her life in America. She honestly acknowledges her reasons for coming to America, focusing on doctoral studies she may not be fully passionate about. She recognizes her marriage as polite rather than passionate and may even envy Charity's romantic relationships. Panna is also aware that some of the stereotypes of Indians in Mamet's play ring true. Beneath her composed, convent-educated exterior, frustration, anger, and rage simmer.

However, Panna has also developed confidence and self-esteem not present in her life in India. She has learned to navigate one of the world's most complex cities, guiding her husband around.

The one outing he plans independently falls short of satisfaction. Panna realizes her competence and the accompanying sense of power and independence. Yet, this realization brings more questions. Will she retain these qualities upon returning to India, or will she surrender them as expected of a good Hindu wife? Will she return at all, or will her trip to the United States become a permanent move? These questions form the heart of the story, exploring the immigrant experience and the choices and options it presents.

Thus the story "A Wife's Story" is a compelling portrayal of the cultural and personal transformations experienced by an Indian woman in the United States, examining the complexities of identity, marriage, and adaptation. Through Panna's character, she highlights the challenges, sacrifices, and inner turmoil experienced by those trying to find their place in a new and often unwelcoming culture.

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