

Women and Marriage in Diaspora, on both sides of the Border

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Article Info
Volume 83
Page Number: 7895 - 7902
Publication Issue:
May-June 2020

Abstract:

India is homeland. We are steeped in the country, its history and its ways since birth. Women in India, we identify with. We understand their plight. We perceive their pain. We are aware of their strengths. And we know their weaknesses and threats. Across the Border, Pakistan, however, is a different story altogether. Pakistan has always been a very favourite, very interesting and very enthusiasm-provoking topic of conversation in India. But as women ourselves, we would like to believe that we the women in India have also wondered what life of a Pakistani woman is like. What is marriage like in Pakistan? Does the wife get respect? Is she treated like an equal? What transitions in life does marriage bring for her? Is life of a married woman across the border, the same story of adjustment, compromise and sacrifices as in the life of a married woman back home in India? In this paper, we endeavour to find an answer to this intriguing question through the woman protagonist featuring in one of the eleven short stories written by the Pakistani author, Syrinna Haque, compiled in *Sand in the Castle*. Sara, in *Home and the Facade*, provides us with a realistically and poignantly keen insight on the life of a married woman across the border; while, also highlighting how life is not much different on this side of the border too, through the character of Dimple, in the veteran Indian author, Bharati Mukherjee's work, *Wife*. There is a whole world of difference between what we, women, seek in marriage, and what we eventually get. Both, Sara and Dimple, are very realistic manifestations of this fact of life and the world, especially when they have to relocate outside their respective countries, leaving everything they hold dear to their hearts behind, to be with their husbands. This paper focuses specifically through Sara and Dimple on the changes life brings when married outside the country.

Key Words: *Women, Husband, Home, Happiness, Adjust, Pain.*

Article History
Article Received: 19 November 2019
Revised: 27 January 2020
Accepted: 24 February 2020
Publication: 18 May 2020

My desire is to be your motivation,
inspiration, and everything else beyond
them too.

My desire is to be the reason you
smile, be the one who makes your
happy dreams come true.

My desire is to be the only one you look up, admire, desire, all in one.

My desire is to be the voice in your heart, telling you things that are a whole lot of fun.

My desire is to be the solution to a your problems, your answers to all questions.

My desire is be right there for you when you need encouragement and suggestions.

My desire is to be your need every morning, and during the day when you have had enough.

My desire is to be there by you when the sun sets in the sky and the day has been rough.

My desire is to be your fervent excitement every time you kiss me good night.

My desire is to be close to your heart when you sleep holding me tight.

My desire, my need, my passion is you, because you're the only one who gets me through.

And I love you more and more with each passing day, trust me, it's true.

I have been blessed with you by my side, by your sheer presence in my life. And mere words couldn't suffice to say that my most treasured title is your wife.

Self-composed.

How difficult is it for a woman to get married? She steps out of the home she was born and brought up in, leaves her blood family behind, moves away from her friends, forsakes her old life, gives up her old habits.... In short, surrenders everything she had held dear for so many years of her life, and moves into a whole new world of new people, new relations, new habits and habitat.... Simply put, a whole new life. How does this transition feel? Have men ever felt the pain women feel in giving up an old entity and enveloping a new one? Women smile

through their tears. They adjust. They compromise. They sacrifice. They do everything expected of them in this fresh new lease of life. Ever wondered what drives them through this? What gives them a semblance of support in their efforts to wholeheartedly embrace all the new changes? Gives them strength to adapt and adjust?

A dream in the eyes of the new bride, and a fervent secret wish in her heart, for a knight in shining armour, in the guise of a husband, is what inspires her to embrace all transitions with grace and happiness. A man who dotes on her, who keeps her tears at bay, protects her from all ravages that life could throw at her, cherishes her presence by his side, takes pride in what she does, at home and beyond, and always stands as a pillar of unflinching support and indomitable strength, by her, with her and for her, is who she dreams of from that first step into puberty, and holds that dream to her heart till the time she stands at the doorway of her conjugal life. For those women who are truly fortunate and blessed, their dreams turn true in time and they live happily ever after.... Just like in the romances they were fond of reading since their adolescence. While for those who are not as fortunate and blessed, the dreams turn into horrifying nightmares, haunting them for ever.

They say marriages are made in heaven. Are they all? They say marriage is holy. Is it? Marriage is neither made in heaven, nor is it holy, for the protagonist, Sara, of the story, *Home and the Facade*, by Syrrina Haque, and Dimple, in *Wife*, by Bharati Mukherjee. Marriage means loss of all dreams and the harshest form of exploitation for the former,

while the latter ends up being a murdered to put an end to her sorrows.

In *Home and the Facade*, Sara breezes into her new life in Manhattan, from Lahore, overwhelmed with emotions of extreme happiness, bubbling excitement and utmost positivity. The first huddle she had constantly been afraid of, immigration, proved no hurdle at all. As she had been born in Seattle, before moving to Lahore, she was a US citizen, thereby easing things out during her move from Lahore back to the US, while also proving to be a great boon for Tariq, her new husband, because she could start to work in the US as soon as she wished to. Financial independence is no more an option for a woman. It is her right.

The first dampener on her spirits was her search for a cab when she landed in the US after the long eighteen-hour flight from home in Pakistan. Tariq wasn't there, work was priority and it was a long commute from his work place too. Neither did he have a car, something that she was so accustomed to in her plush life in Lahore. But shouldn't he have been there, considering the fact that she had first stepped foot on US soil as his new bride? On reaching the apartment, more disappointment was in store. There was no doorman, as Tariq had promised to her, to help her carry her heavy bags inside. Noisy, crowded, rundown, it was a far cry from her sprawling family estate back home. She suppressed that first hint of nervous apprehension with renewed hope as she opened the door to the apartment. But this time, the disappointment came back with full force. The apartment was bright, but it was miniscule. There was a closet with no space for her stuff. There was a bed,

which she had wanted to purchase with her husband. And a cuckoo clock she hated at sight. A tiny kitchenette competed it. Where was the feeling of home? Or warmth? Or all enveloping love? It seemed cold to her. Bereft of emotions. And purely unsuitable for a new bride.

Yet, she persisted in her hopes for a better tomorrow. An eighteen hour journey could really wear you out, tax you physically and emotionally, render your experience bleak and dull. Better to sleep it off. And that is precisely what she does. Manhattan was cold and windy. But that was outside. Sara was inside. Warm. Protected.

Tariq came in later and woke her up. "I love the apartment" (44), she told him. "As she said it, there was a tinge of hesitation, which she didn't understand at that point. That wouldn't happen until four months later." (44)

In Pakistan, arranged marriages rule. And Sara's marriage was no exception. Her marriage to Tariq was arranged, with both sets of parents harbouring a secret strategy; Tariq's mother wanted a US citizen as daughter-in-law, while Sara's mother was looking for a foreign resident bachelor with a MBA degree for her daughter. Both their wishes saw culmination in the marriage of Tariq and Sara.

Life in the US was busy. Sara and Tariq worked all day, the latter even working in the nights, more frequently than Sara could reason why. He was, after all, working as a Marketing Strategist in a multinational French company. What was he doing in night shifts then? He came home late, exhausted, red eyed and with a head full of blue, throbbing veins. Low on patience, cranky, the only time when

he was cheerful was when his mother called, daily. And while Tariq came home to eat, rest and leave again the next day, Sara slogged in the tiny, stuffy kitchenette once back from work. Tariq liked homemade chapatis and kababs. And the free-spirited, easy-going girl in Pakistan, who loved her takeaways and home deliveries, in her six-bedroom house with a jacuzzi and a swimming pool in Pakistan, was now struggling with the stove to feed her overworked husband. A husband who complained of recession while his mother flaunted imported diamonds back home, and who, in two months, hadn't bothered to consummate the marriage either. Yet her parents think she is better off in the US, with the fear of bombs and Taliban threats looming over life in Pakistan. Was she better? That only destiny would reveal in time.

So life fell into a routine. Sara came home from work and cooked, falling into a deep dreamless sleep thereafter; Tariq coming in the wee hours of the morning, waking her up for freshly made rotis, eating and sleeping. No moments for passion, no time for love. And the other constant in their set life, Tariq's mother's daily phone calls to light up his face.

But all the routine life and monotony flew out of the window that night of May 20, nearly four months after she had arrived in the US. Life took an unpredictable turn from which there could be no going back, and the scars were to be born by Sara through her life, or what remained of it. Tariq comes home, angry, impatient, and frustrated, and takes her to where he worked night shifts. As Sara stepped into a dark alley which could be no multinational, French company, with ugly graffiti on the sodden walls and

rusty iron doors, two Caucasian men ravaged her with their eyes, and while she went up the stairs, a strange putrid smell, and equally strange noises terrified her. Something did not feel right, something made her nervous. "What is this smell? It's hash, or not, something strong... I smelled it at Daniyal's party in Lahore." (49) Sara tried to recollect. 'Sara's head was asking so many questions, and her heart seemed to be running a race.... She was trying to make sense of the place where Tariq worked.' (49), a place which was giving her the creeps. But she knew she was with her husband and nothing could go wrong.

Tariq gave her a cola to drink, and she sucked on the straw, trying hard to not vomit her guts out at the smelly Puerto Rican man who brought in her drink. Her head was fuzzy, whether it was for the smell, or the ambience, time would tell.

When Sara woke up, she was lying in her bed in her apartment in a flimsy satin dress, cold and hurting in the head. "Panic rushed through her head. This is not me. Or is it? There were flashes of nighttime frenzy running through her head." (49)

Blaring lights, umbrella, mirror with red lipstick, dark eyes, smelly air, shirtless men... images and sounds fused in her mind and senses, frightening her in their intensity. Her body felt violated. Strange. Alien. The pain around her thighs was intense. She was in a frenzy, confused and puzzled, with an overwhelming feeling of being drained inside her. Her memories of the past night crept up as blurred images in her head - the beeping sound of a machine, naked men wearing surgical masks, lots of red and black lace, net stockings, lights, moaning sounds.... All kept

coming back like waves crashing against her psyche. The stench of a shirtless man's nauseating tobacco laced bad breath on her bare shoulders seemed to be imprinted on her nostrils. But why were her shoulders bare? Why was a camera there in the room? What was that movement on her body, inside her body? And why was Tariq there behind the camera? She sobbed, panicky and scared, alone and lonely. Home in Pakistan couldn't be a refuge, it was being torn apart by terrorist threats and actions. With no one to turn to, and no place to go, Sara broke down, devastated and disillusioned, her head reeling with questions she had no answers to. She had to go home and she decided she would. She had saved for it.

Having decided to go back to Pakistan, Sara felt better. But her ordeal wasn't over yet. Her call to her banker to withdraw her savings revealed facts she barely had the strength to face or fight. There was hardly any money in her account, Tariq had been withdrawing lumps of her savings from their joint account, which she had agreed to, to save paperwork. And as she took a taxi later from the bank, the truth came crashing down on her, bludgeoning her with an almost physical tangibility. "Was she kept virgin for a reason?" (51)

Her wedding had been such a happy affair, extravagant and grand. Her parents had adorned her in designer clothes and ridiculously expensive jewelry, which Tariq's mother had asked Sara not to travel to the US with. She would bring the jewelry to the US a few months later, Tariq's mother had reassured. Now, sitting in the taxi, brooding over everything, she kept getting flashes of her mother-in-law's expensive clothes and jewelry. More alarming thoughts

crept up in her mind, in fact, so many of them that she felt she was losing sanity. So many questions harangued her mind... Why did Tariq need her money? Why did he need her to make money? Wasn't his family rich? She kept seeing photographs of his mother in couture clothes and jewelry. Where did all that money come from? Her answer lay concealed in a drawer back in the apartment. Tariq was nowhere around. And there within the barren, cold walls of the apartment, the enormity of the revelation crushed her hopes and dreams of a happily ever after for ever... Receipts from Sara's account, of money being sent back home to Pakistan, to a Mrs Jamila Murad, Tariq's mother.

Marriage is supposedly sacred, but defiling the sanctity of marriage, and committing blasphemy is common throughout the world. Crimes committed in marriage can be found in abundance everywhere and although most of them typically go unrecorded, physical and emotional aggression between husband and wife accounts for a significant proportion of recorded criminal assaults, homicides and torture. And trafficking in marriage looms large over these records, with, at any given time, upwards of 12.3 million people being exploited as modern day slaves through the second largest and fastest growing criminal industry in the world: human trafficking. Veiled behind the widely celebrated and sanctified institution of marriage and behind protections of liberty and privacy, one segment of the human trafficking industry continues to be overlooked, tolerated, and often excluded from criminalisation: the trafficking of foreign brides. Pakistan, or India, or elsewhere across the world, certain things never change.

A woman gets married with so many dreams of a happy life thereafter, reveling in the love of her husband, basking in marital bliss, a feeling of satiated contentment perpetually engulfing her, but for so many of them, these dreams are dashed to the ground by the burden of reality. Should marriage be the legal way for men to subjugate women? Should women grow up in constant fear of being taken advantage of? Should women live in abysmal and dismal conditions upon being married? It happens in India. And it happens across the border too. No saree can protect her from her fate. Nor can the burka. And neither can any religion.

Marriage is a process of migration for all women, physically and emotionally. Time reveals if the migration is a happy or sad one. Like Sara, of Pakistan, we now meet another distressed, unfortunate wife back home in India, Dimple, in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*, who undergoes a drastic change in her life in the course of the story. Her hopes of a truly happy ending are rooted in her belief that marriage "would free her, fill her with passion. Discreet and virgin, she waited for real life to begin. She hoped that marriage would offer her a different kind of life- an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris" (*Wife*, 3)

But in reality, her dream too, like Sara's, are dashed to the ground after marriage. From the very first chapter, we are aware that the marriage is mismatched. Dimple leaves her parent's home to be with her husband, Amit, in the USA, who "expects her, like Sita, to jump into fire if necessary." (*Wife*, 30). The materialistic approach of Amit and his

indifference to or rather abhorrence for emotional attachment is evident in his coldness and stern pragmatism and his sheer disinterest to bother about his sensitive wife, and his overt concern with facts and philosophy. And despite all her earnest endeavours, Dimple fails to adjust and adapt in the new culture, especially because of the total lack of her husband's support. Amit has no job, and his joblessness makes him bitter and self-centred. And circumstances were deteriorating rapidly day by day. While Amit is anxious for the job, Dimple fantasises about a queen size bed. While Amit has little interest in his wife's culinary excursions, Dimple prepares a salad for him with utmost love and care. She wants to tie his tie but he simply refuses her. The psychological need for 'love and belongingness' are imperative to developing a healthy mind and body. Bereft of this, Dimple stops sharing things with him to him, slowly turning into a reserved introvert. Feeling of loneliness homelessness apart, she is persistently haunted by the question of identity, as, now, after marriage she has to carry her husband's surname. Moreover, Amit says to Dimple, "My mother wants to call you Nandini. She doesn't like Dimple as a name." (*Wife*, 62) So her surname changes, as well as her name. But life just moves from one patriarchal world to another, as Dimple wishes to modernise herself as per American culture, and Amit forbids her to blindly emulate the Western culture. A strong believer in patriarchy, Amit opposes women liberation and equality. Dimple, unhappy and saddened by his constant taunts, realises that life in the US was not about cocktails under canopied skies as she has envisaged but 3 AM drives to dingy restaurants where they sold

cheap Kababs rolled in roti. (Wife, 102)

Dimple is constantly and persistently haunted by feelings of being alone, adrift and purposeless, and subtle hints of deeper mental instability and a tendency toward violence are perceivable. There are beginnings of a split personality in her and her body and soul seem apart. She is immediate and physical with other around her but with Amit she has constantly to suppress her anger, which keeps simmering in her unconscious all the time. She even broods over suicide, as an escape from the sordid reality of her life, and her depression eats away at her mind to the extent where she loses her judgement completely. Losing all sense of judgement and sanity, one day, finally, she lashes out at her husband with a knife and not just kills him, but beheads him.

She sneaked up on him and chose a spot, her favourite spot just under the hairline, where the mole was getting larger and browner, and she drew an imaginary line of kisses ... she touched the mole very lightly and let her finger's draw a circle around the delectable spot, then she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle 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 head fall off- but of course it was her imagination because she was not sure any more what she had seen on TV and what she had seen in the private screen of three A.M (Wife, 212-13)

Both men and women have their own specific expectations from a marriage, however, the importance and

impact of these expectations are different for both men and women. Women tend to be more reflective and intense in their expectations. They have an innate inclination to excel in whatever they delve into. This makes a woman take that extra plunge in every relationship and situation in life.

Right from childhood, a girl aspires that her first love should be permanent and lasting. These aspirations have been taking a backseat with upcoming generations where likes and dislikes seem to have thin lines separating them. While the power to recoil back from a heart break has increased with the increasing distractions, the negative impact of a heartbreak has witnessed very extreme situations. In the instance the love affair culminates into a marriage, a girl takes it for granted that marriage will bring along a sweet relationship similar to pre marriage.

In both arranged and love marriages, post marriage, the practical issues and concerns are similar. In most cases, it has been observed that post marriage, the relationship takes a different turn. When partners start living under one roof after marriage and emotive with each other, very different issues arise which if not handled properly, lead to disastrous marriages. For example, proximity which is so desired in the initial phases gradually leads to adducing with space in the relationship. In absence of this space, partners start overstepping boundaries. And if not managed in time, it terminates the marriage itself. There are other mounting challenges in marriage like dwindling appreciation, infidelity, financial concerns, each of which have to get handled in a different way.

Most often, it is perceived that women try to salvage relationships by making compromises and tolerating beyond endurance. Evidence shows that some extreme compromises have saved marriages but many a time, have resulted in gross torture on women or women retaliating with horrifying consequences. Somewhere, women lose the vision of what should be the limit of compromise, in the hope of making things work. Such a pressure is not foisted on men externally or internally. *The presence of a glass ceiling follows women both in corporate world as well as on the personal front.*

Bharati Mukherjee's attack in *Wife* is not against any individual. Just as Haque portrayed through the characters in *Home and the Facade*, the emphasis is a biased system that favours men and tolerates and probably promotes the subjugation of women. In *Wife*, as in *Home and the Facade*, the authors, from both sides of the border, paint women characters who iterate the marginalization of woman by exploring—and exploding—ways in which culture and ideology construct feminine identity. Both Haque and Mukherjee, aim at depicting the psyche of those immigrants wives, their experiences of immigration uprooting and re-rooting, their struggle to maintain the difference between the life they lived at home in their respective countries, and the new one they have had to adopt.

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