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Thrown in the United States: A Heideggerian Existential Perspective of "Wife"

Twin Antony Edward¹, Dr. B. Lakshmikantham^{2*}

1. PhD Research Scholar (Reg. No. 12034), St. Xavier's College, Palayamkottai-627011, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli- 627012, Tamil Nadu, India

2*. Assistant Professor of English, St. Xavier's College, Palayamkottai-627011, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli- 627012, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* (1975) presents the story of Dimple Dasgupta, a young Bengali woman who moves from Calcutta to New York following an arranged marriage. While critics have traditionally approached the novel through postcolonial, feminist, and diasporic frameworks, a Heideggerian existential analysis reveals deeper philosophical dimensions of Dimple's experience. Martin Heidegger's concept of "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*) provides a compelling lens through which to understand Dimple's existential condition—first as a woman thrown into the constraints of patriarchal society in Calcutta, and subsequently as an immigrant thrown into the alien cultural landscape of the United States. This paper argues that Dimple's tragic trajectory can be understood through Heidegger's existential analytics, particularly his concepts of thrownness, Being-in-the-world, authenticity versus inauthenticity, and temporality. Through this philosophical framework, *Wife* emerges not merely as a novel about immigration and cultural displacement, but as a profound meditation on the human condition of finding oneself always already thrown into situations not of one's choosing.

Keywords: Existentialism; Heidegger; Dasein; Geworfenheit (thrownness); diaspora; Indian American literature; gender; memory; authenticity.

Heidegger's Existential Analytics: Being, Thrownness, and Authenticity

To understand Dimple's existential predicament, we must first establish the key concepts from Heidegger's *Being and Time* that illuminate her experience. Heidegger's fundamental concern lies with the question of Being (*Sein*) and the unique way in which human beings exist as *Dasein*—literally "being-there" or "being-in-the-world." As Heidegger explains, "Dasein is an entity which is in each case mine, and which has, as its manner of Being, the possibility of existing authentically or inauthentically" (Heidegger 68). This existential structure reveals that human existence is not a fixed essence but a dynamic possibility that must be continually chosen and enacted. Central to Heidegger's analysis is the concept of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), which describes the fundamental condition of human existence: we find ourselves already situated in a world not of our making, with particular historical, cultural, and social circumstances that we did not choose. As Heidegger notes, "Dasein has been thrown into existence" and "the expression 'thrownness' is meant to suggest the facticity of its being delivered over" (174). This thrownness is not merely a past event but an ongoing existential structure—we are continuously thrown into situations that demand response and decision.

Heidegger distinguishes between authentic and inauthentic modes of existence in relation to

throwness. Inauthentic existence involves losing oneself in the "they-self" (*das Man*), conforming to social expectations and avoiding the anxiety that comes with recognizing one's radical freedom and responsibility. Authentic existence, by contrast, involves "resoluteness" (*Entschlossenheit*) in the face of one's throwness—accepting one's situation while taking responsibility for one's choices within it. As Heidegger argues, "Resoluteness, as authentic Being-one's-Self, does not detach Dasein from its world, nor does it isolate it so that it becomes a free- floating 'I'" (344). Rather, authentic existence involves fully engaging with one's thrown condition while maintaining one's ownmost possibilities. The temporal structure of human existence is equally crucial to Heidegger's analysis. Human beings exist as "Being-toward-death" (*Sein-zum-Tode*), finite beings whose awareness of their mortality gives urgency and meaning to their choices. This finitude is not simply biological but existential—it provides the context within which authentic decision-making becomes possible. The recognition of finitude can lead either to authentic resolve or to inauthentic flight into the distractions of everyday life.

The Thrown Condition: Dimple's Existential Situation in Calcutta

From the novel's opening, Dimple embodies the condition of throwness that Heidegger describes. She finds herself situated within the constraints of middle-class Bengali society, where her possibilities are largely determined by patriarchal structures she did not choose. "Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father was looking for engineers in the matrimonial ads" (Mukherjee 3). This opening sentence immediately establishes the tension between Dimple's desires and the social forces that shape her fate. Dimple's throwness manifests in multiple dimensions. Culturally, she is thrown into a society that defines women primarily through their relationships to men—first as daughters, then as wives. The novel's epigraph, "Dimple: any slight surface depression" from the Oxford English Dictionary, ironically highlights her reduction to a mere surface feature, a decorative depression lacking depth or substance. This linguistic definition captures her existential situation: she exists primarily as a lack, defined by what she is not rather than what she might become.

Her response to this thrown condition reveals the inauthentic patterns that Heidegger identifies with the "they-self." Dimple loses herself in magazine advertisements and beauty products, seeking to conform to societal expectations of feminine attractiveness. "In her despair, Dimple took to reading ads in women's magazines and buying skin whiteners ('Be the colour you were meant to be') and an isometric exerciser ('In two weeks my figure developed 10 cms.')" (Mukherjee 4). These attempts at self-modification represent what Heidegger would call "fallenness" (*Verfallenheit*)—the tendency to lose oneself in the concerns and opinions of others rather than owning one's existence authentically. The arranged marriage system itself exemplifies the social structures that constrain Dimple's possibilities. She cannot choose her partner based on her own values or desires but must submit to her father's practical considerations. When she meets her future husband, Amit, she experiences him as fundamentally alien: "Later Dimple told Pixie that she had been too nervous to take a good look but that she thought he was like the young executives in clothing ads" (Mukherjee 15). This description reveals her inability to encounter Amit as a concrete individual; instead, she perceives him through the mediating lens of commercial imagery, highlighting the inauthentic nature of their relationship.

Dimple's physical and psychological symptoms—her mysterious illness, anxiety, and depression—can be understood as manifestations of existential anxiety (*Angst*) in response to her thrown condition. Heidegger

distinguishes anxiety from fear, noting that "anxiety makes manifest in Dasein its Being towards its ownmost potentiality-for-Being" (232). Dimple's illness represents an unconscious recognition of her constrained possibilities, a somatic expression of her existential situation. Her fantasies of marriage as liberation—"Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love" (Mukherjee 3)—reveal her inauthentic understanding of what freedom means. She imagines freedom not as the radical responsibility that Heidegger describes, but as entry into a different set of social conventions. This misunderstanding sets the stage for the more profound disillusionment that follows her immigration to America.

Displacement and Being-in-the-World: The American Experience

Dimple's immigration to the United States represents a second, more radical form of thrownness. If her situation in Calcutta was constraining, it was at least familiar; America presents her with a complete disruption of her lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*). Heidegger's concept of Being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) helps illuminate the profundity of this displacement. For Heidegger, being-in-the-world is not simply a matter of physical location but involves a complex web of meaningful relationships, practical understanding, and cultural familiarity that constitute our lived environment. In New York, Dimple experiences what we might call "existential homelessness"—a condition that goes beyond mere geographical displacement to encompass a fundamental disorientation of being. The familiar cultural codes that previously organized her world no longer apply. She cannot navigate the social expectations of American middle-class life, cannot understand the references and assumptions that her neighbors take for granted. This disorientation manifests in her increasing isolation and inability to form meaningful connections with her new environment.

The temporal structure of her American experience further illustrates her existential predicament. As Heidegger notes, "Temporality is the primordial 'outside-of-itself' in and for itself" and "temporalizes itself equiprimordially in the ecstases of the future, the having been, and the Present" (377). Dimple's temporality becomes increasingly distorted in America. Her past in Calcutta recedes into irrelevance, her present becomes unbearably empty, and her future appears blocked or meaningless. Without a coherent temporal structure, her existence loses its organising principle. The apartment in New York becomes a physical manifestation of her existential condition. Unlike the extended family context of Calcutta, with its predictable routines and social connections, the American apartment isolates her in what Heidegger would recognize as an inauthentic mode of dwelling. She is surrounded by material objects—television, appliances, consumer goods—but these fail to constitute a meaningful world. The apartment becomes less a home than a stage set for a life she cannot authentically inhabit.

Dimple's relationship with Amit deteriorates in this context, not simply because of personal incompatibility but because both are struggling with their own experiences of thrownness. Amit's response to immigration—his focus on professional success and material accumulation—represents one possible, though ultimately inauthentic, response to displacement. He loses himself in the "they-self" of American middle-class aspiration, avoiding the anxiety of his existential situation through busy-ness and conformity. The question of language becomes crucial in understanding Dimple's displacement. Language, for Heidegger, is not merely a tool for communication but the "house of Being"—the medium through which world and meaning are disclosed. Dimple's imperfect command of English creates an additional layer of alienation. She cannot fully express herself or understand others, creating a barrier to authentic encounter and relationship.

Authentic and Inauthentic Responses to Thrownness

Mukherjee's novel presents various characters who embody different responses to the condition of thrownness, allowing us to see Dimple's trajectory in relation to other possibilities. Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence provides a framework for understanding these varied responses to displacement and cultural alienation. Ina Mullick, Dimple's neighbor, represents one form of inauthentic response to immigration. She has successfully assimilated into American middle-class life, but at the cost of what Heidegger would call her "ownmost" possibilities. Ina has adopted American consumer culture wholesale, losing herself in shopping, social climbing, and the pursuit of material success. Her relationship with her identity has become purely instrumental—she uses her Indian background when convenient but feels no authentic connection to it.

Other immigrant characters in the novel display what we might call "nostalgic inauthenticity"—they respond to thrownness by attempting to recreate their homeland in America, refusing to engage authentically with their new situation. This response, while understandable, represents another form of flight from the anxiety of authentic existence. By clinging to an idealized past, these characters avoid confronting their present reality and the possibilities it contains. Dimple's response differs from both of these patterns. Rather than successfully assimilating or retreating into nostalgia, she experiences what we might call "existential paralysis." She can neither fully embrace her new situation nor abandon her old identity. This paralysis manifests in her increasing withdrawal from social interaction, her inability to make decisions, and her growing sense of unreality about her existence. Her relationship with television and American popular culture illustrates this paralysis. She becomes obsessed with television programs and advertisements, but her engagement remains purely passive and voyeuristic. She watches American life without participating in it, understanding it without truly inhabiting it. This voyeuristic relationship to her environment represents what Heidegger calls "idle talk" (*Gerede*) and "curiosity" (*Neugier*)—inauthentic modes of engagement that maintain the appearance of involvement while avoiding genuine encounter.

The most telling aspect of Dimple's inauthenticity is her relationship to her own desires and possibilities. Throughout the novel, she rarely acts on her own initiative, instead reacting to the expectations and demands of others. When she does express desires—such as her attraction to other men or her fantasies of different lives—these remain purely fantasmatic, never translating into authentic choice or action. Her marriage to Amit exemplifies this pattern. Rather than confronting the genuine incompatibilities in their relationship or working toward mutual understanding, both characters retreat into resentment and avoidance. Their relationship becomes what Heidegger would recognize as a form of "Being-with-one-another" (*Miteinandersein*) that lacks authentic communication or care. They exist in physical proximity without genuine encounter, each lost in their own anxieties and disappointments. The pregnancy and subsequent abortion represent a crucial moment in Dimple's existential trajectory. The pregnancy forces her to confront the question of her own agency and responsibility in a direct way. Her decision to abort can be understood as one of the few moments in the novel where she acts rather than merely reacts. However, even this decision remains largely inarticulate and unconscious, driven more by panic than by clear resolve.

Temporality, Finitude, and the Collapse of Meaning

The final movement of the novel toward violence and tragedy can be understood through Heidegger's analysis of temporality and Being-toward-death. As Dimple's situation becomes increasingly unbearable, her relationship to time becomes more distorted, and her awareness of finitude more acute. Heidegger argues that authentic existence requires a proper understanding of one's mortality: "Being-toward-death is essentially anxiety" and this anxiety "brings Dasein face to face with its ownmost potentiality-for-Being" (295). Dimple's growing preoccupation with violence and death throughout the novel can be seen as an unconscious attempt to confront the question of finitude that her inauthentic existence has avoided. The temporal structure of her final crisis reveals the collapse of meaningful temporality that Heidegger associates with inauthentic existence. Her past has become irrelevant, her present unbearable, and her future inconceivable. Without a coherent temporal structure, her existence loses its organizing principle. She exists in what Heidegger calls the "moment" (*Augenblick*) but not in the authentic sense of resolute decision; rather, she experiences a kind of temporal paralysis where past, present, and future collapse into an undifferentiated anxiety.

The novel's climactic violence can be understood as Dimple's desperate attempt to break out of this temporal paralysis through decisive action. However, because she has not developed the capacity for genuine resolve, her actions take a destructive rather than creative form. Her violence represents what we might call "inauthentic resoluteness"—a moment of decision that lacks the proper foundation in self-understanding and acceptance of one's thrown condition. Heidegger's concept of "idle talk" (*Gerede*) helps explain the communicative breakdown that precedes the novel's climax. Throughout their marriage, Dimple and Amit engage in increasingly empty conversations that maintain the appearance of communication while avoiding genuine encounters. Their words become disconnected from their actual experiences and feelings, creating a linguistic barrier that parallels their emotional alienation. The breakdown of language in the novel's final sections reflects a more general collapse of meaning-making structures. Dimple can no longer organize her experience into coherent narratives or make sense of her situation in terms of familiar cultural categories. This semantic crisis accompanies and intensifies her existential crisis, leaving her without the conceptual resources to understand or address her situation constructively.

The question of responsibility becomes crucial in understanding the novel's tragic conclusion. Heidegger's analysis suggests that authentic existence requires taking full responsibility for one's choices while acknowledging the thrown conditions within which those choices must be made. Dimple's violence represents a catastrophic failure of this responsibility—she acts destructively precisely because she has not developed the capacity for authentic self-ownership that genuine responsibility requires.

Conclusion

Reading Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* through a Heideggerian existential lens reveals dimensions of the immigrant experience that purely sociological or cultural analyses might miss. Dimple's tragedy is not simply the result of cultural displacement or gender oppression, though these factors are crucial. More fundamentally, her story illustrates the universal human challenge of existing authentically in the face of thrownness—the condition of finding oneself always already situated in circumstances not of one's choosing. The novel's power lies in its ability to show how individual psychological crisis connects to

broader existential structures of human existence. Dimple's experience of immigration and cultural displacement intensifies universal aspects of the human condition, making visible the anxiety, responsibility, and temporal structure that characterise all authentic existence. Her inability to respond authentically to her thrown condition leads not only to personal tragedy but to the destruction of others, illustrating the ethical dimensions of existential authenticity.

The Heideggerian analysis also reveals the inadequacy of purely assimilationist approaches to immigration and cultural difference. The novel suggests that successful adaptation to a new cultural environment requires more than learning new customs or acquiring material success. It demands a fundamental reorientation of one's relationship to existence itself—an authentic acceptance of one's thrown condition combined with resolute commitment to one's ownmost possibilities. Furthermore, the novel's exploration of gender and cultural constraint gains additional depth when viewed through existential categories. Dimple's oppression as a woman and as an immigrant becomes not merely a matter of social injustice but a particular intensification of the universal human challenge of living authentically in the face of limiting circumstances. This perspective does not diminish the importance of addressing social and cultural inequities but places them within a broader understanding of human existence and possibility.

The novel's tragic ending suggests that the failure to develop authentic existence has consequences that extend beyond the individual to affect entire communities. Dimple's violence represents not only personal breakdown but the collapse of the ethical relationships that make social life possible. In this sense, the novel functions as a cautionary tale about the social costs of existential inauthenticity. Ultimately, *Wife* emerges from this analysis as a profound meditation on the nature of human freedom and responsibility under conditions of constraint and displacement. While Dimple's story ends in tragedy, the novel's careful attention to the existential dimensions of her experience suggests possibilities for more authentic responses to the challenges of immigration and cultural change. The path to such authenticity, Heidegger and Mukherjee both suggest, lies not in denial of one's thrown condition but in its full acceptance and transformation through resolute action. The novel thus stands as both a specific account of one woman's struggle with displacement and a universal exploration of the human condition. Through the lens of Heideggerian existential analysis, Dimple's story becomes emblematic of the broader human task of living authentically in a world that we do not choose. However, it must nonetheless inhabit with full responsibility and commitment to our ownmost possibilities.

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