



SUFFERINGS OF AN INNOCENT INDIAN WOMAN IN MANJU KAPUR'S 'THE IMMIGRANT'

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ABSTRACT

*Manju Kapur is a Professor of English at Miranda House, University. She is the author of five novels. Her first novel, Difficult Daughters (1998) won the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Her second novel, A Married Woman (2002) was called 'fluent and witty', while her third novel Home (2006) was described as 'glistening with detail and emotional acuity'. Her fourth novel **The Immigrant** (2008) has been long listed for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and her fifth novel is Custody (2011). Manju Kapur speaks for the middle class and even has earned several comparisons with Jane Austen. This paper deals with the sufferings of an innocent Indian Woman who faces the realities in a new world with no one to support her legally or psychologically in Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*. It proves that immigration implies not only geographical shift of locations but also proves to be a major shifting force to modify human consciousness including harmony and moral value system. Its main problem is how and why women suffer the loss and isolation in trans-cultural space. In it, Kapur mingles the complexity of immigrant perspective with the complexity of marital and sexual harmony. It deals with the problems like anxiety, medical investigations, apprehensions about the weakness of her husband and rootlessness.*

Key words: Immigrant, isolation, dilemma, rootlessness

INTRODUCTION

The Immigrant is the story of Nina, thirty years of English lecturer at Miranda House where she studied. She feels frustrated with the impoverished life she is leading. Her mother, like all Indian mothers, gets growingly worried to marry her off to a respectable boy and feels elated to get Ananda as her son-in-law. When a marriage proposal comes for Nina from an NRI, a dentist by profession settled in Canada, Nina's mother's happiness knew no bounds and she prayed for the proposal to materialize. The marriage took place with a lot of show of material wealth of Ananda.

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After the marriage ceremony the couple moved to Oberoi Hotel for their honeymoon. After three months she got her visa and proceeded to cross the ocean.

The first bitter experience of being an immigrant comes her way when she reaches Toronto and at the immigration clearance counter she is asked to step aside. She waits. The whole people queuing for entry into the country look away, the colored ones have pity in their eyes” (105).

The immigration woman examines each page of her passport suspiciously. Nina’s claim that she has married a citizen needs to be scrutinized despite the paper work. The officer asks her all sorts of irrelevant questions that make her feel edgy.

“Rage fills her, why are people so silent about the humiliations they faced in the west? She was a teacher at a University, yet this woman, probably high school pass, can imprison her in a cell like room, scare her and condemn her. Though she was addressed as ma’am, no respect is conveyed. Here a different yardstick is used to judge her”. (106).

This is the first deception one experiences in a foreign land. The clash between Indian Culture and Western Influence results into the psychological dilemma for the people.

Then Halifax spread before them, gleaming in the sun, small and sweet.

“Like it?” asked Ananda, turning to her and laughing. He knew he was presenting something of value, civilized, ordered and therefore beautiful”. (110).

Her ‘new home’ was a tiny apartment, consisting of a tiny corridor with a little kitchen at its end, two rooms and a bathroom.

“Life, in complete contrast to Indian ways, began with a sense of freedom, freedom from the probing eyes of the family members, neighbours, domestic helps “No servant, landlord, landlady, neighbour or mother was there to see”. (113)

Initially the solitude is pleasing but soon it turns to loneliness with no one to talk to, no one to share with the common everyday pleasures. It is difficult for a wife when after some days

‘books are powerless to distract, when house and its conveniences can no longer completely charm and compensate. Then she realizes she is an immigrant for life’. (122)



Homesickness sets in, and she feels forlorn. She cries when she is alone in Canada. She tries to have a baby but she is not fertilized. She compels Ananda to involve in investigation of his sperms. Ananda feels it is an attack on his manhood and she gets more restless.

Her physical and mental distance from Ananda who loses interest in sexual consummation because of his sexual problems. Nina spends sleepless nights thinking of her uncertain future. The prospect of conceiving also recedes and in her desperation she sees a doctor who finds no fault with her and advises her to visit him with her husband. This information horrifies Ananda and the rift in their conjugal life widens.

Kapur says:

“Distance grew between them. Nina felt imprisoned by the stress, and assured him there were other things besides sex in marriage. Relationship had to develop, feelings had to be shared, surely he understood that? Everything she said made it worse” (185)

The chasm in their conjugal life grows so vast that they gradually drift apart. Nina firms her feet to be independent and before having a child, she wishes to settle herself and says, *‘I miss home-I miss a job-I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?’ (237)* Nina joined library course to find her identity in foreign country. Ananda took treatment of sexual therapy for the problem of premature ejaculation.

Ananda secretly makes a visit to California and after two weeks training returns with newly learned techniques of overcoming his inadequacies. Nina feels hurt and annoyed at Ananda for keeping not only his visit but the purpose too, a secret from her. The husband wife relationship has to have sharing and when it is not so, there are cracks. His training in California had brought into his life a new wave of happiness.

‘Sex is no great issue in the West. Here it’s no big deal, but in your culture it must be different, Sue said to him one day when she was with him for a date. Sex did not mean commitment’ (36.) and ‘nobody owned anybody’ (39).

This opened endless possibilities yet Ananda had remained bereft of girlfriends all these years.

Ananda with his cured sexual capability feels liberated and free to experiment sex with his newly appointed receptionist Mandy who proves more possessive and demanding than Nina. Instead of strengthening his marital bond he shows perversion in his regular visit to his mistress and later to girls in the bars. In the mean time, a sweeping change takes place in Nina’s life with her admission to a two year-Library Science course that would make it easier



for her to get a job in Canada. She also develops sexual relationship with her classmate Anton hailing from New York.

“A trip to national Archives, National Library necessitated Nina to take the trip to Ottawa. The four day trip was a pleasurable, but exhausting exercise .On the last day they got together to celebrate in a pub. Joining in the fun Nina too held a cigarette between her fingers and had drinks. She felt daring. It was easy here, drinking, smoking, asserting something, probably her sexuality” (258)

So there was no reason to feel guilty.

‘For the first time she had a sense of her own self, entirely separate from other people,autonomous,independent.So strange that the sex did not make her feel guilty, not beyond the initial shock’(260)

She breaks another taboo when she returns home, by eating flesh.

”After she had sex with Anton, it seemed especially hypocritical to hang on vegetables” (266). “So it was down with all taboos. She agreed to Ananda’s offer to taste trout which he was preparing. His assurance that she won’t regret this decision of hers and life would become easier for her from now on echoed in her ears. Though she knew it was not for convenience that she had decided to switch over but due to a sense of fragmentations and distress. That weekend Nina tasted everything one by one Red Meat, Flesh, Mammals, Cow” (267).

Immigrants change their personality because they face pressure of postcolonial ideology. Without changing themselves, they can’t live in the developed country. Not only that, Nina goes to Canada with lots of saris, but she could not wear them due to the colonial mentality. She starts wearing jeans instead of salwar suits and saris. She gives up her own dressing style and accepts theirs.

Nina and Ananda carried on with their relationships with Anton and Mandy respectively without the knowledge of one’s deception of the other and each felt liberated because such relationships were not relationship but *‘purely meeting of the bodies; a healthy give and take’(269)*. She initially enjoys his company but later changes her mind as she realizes that she is being used as a stopgap sexual tool. Sexual inadequacy turns into insecurity and then to infidelity. Meanwhile the news of her mother’s death literally breaks her heart and Ananda arranges her second visit to India to observe the rituals.

After Nina mother’s death Nina thought Ananda only her anchor in her life and as well as Canada. But extramarital relation of Ananda with the discovery of the ‘yellow hair’ next to



her pillow, Nina realized that she could no longer consider Ananda as her anchor, nor Anton, her lover, who had forced himself upon her, using her for his own pleasures. She deliberately pulled off all bonds that could have held her, freed herself and moved on. She took a job and left Halifax, her husband and all memories behind.

'The women's Group that encouraged her to be angry and assertive. Beth, Gayatri, Library school; the Sense of community was there, warming but Temporary- everything temporary'. (330).

She realized that this was the ultimate immigrant experience not that anything was steady enough to attach yourself to for the rest of your life, but that you found different ways to belong, was not necessarily lasting, but ones that made your journey less lonely for a while. At the end of the novel, she becomes a new woman, totally different from what she was before her marriage in India.

Kapur generalizes the predicament of the girls who embark on a new land in the following lines:

"The immigrant who comes as a wife has a more difficult time. If work exists for her, it is in the future, and after much finding of feet. At present all she is a wife, and a wife is alone for many, many hours. There will come a day when even books are powerless to distract. When the house and its conveniences can no longer completely charm or compensate, then she realizes she is an immigrant for life". (124).

Even though Nina does not find that spark in him, she is pursued by her mother and her friend to marry Ananda being told that her future lies in going abroad with Ananda. Kapur justifies Nina's departure by giving us a brief history of diaspora:

"In the nineteenth century people departed from their northern homes in boat lands, voyaging to Australia, Asia and Americas. They left behind countries that had offered neither men nor security, left behind hopeless futures and lonely presents. In the women of the homeland, the waiting men saw helpers, family makers and standard bearers. In the twentieth century it was the Asian woman's turn. The immigrant man needed a bride who would surround him with familiar traditions, habits, attitudes, whose reward was the prosperity of the west and a freedom often not available to her at home". (79)

Nina decides to cross the seas to marry a person who lives on an unseen land. For Nina's mother, her duty is over by marrying off her daughter abroad. Nina lands on the new land with dreams of a family but they are shattered soon. Ananda is incapable of satisfying her sexually, so she is not able to conceive. Not only that, whenever she comes up with any



suggestions regarding the treatment for his problem of premature ejaculation, Ananda becomes hostile. She realizes that Ananda was aware of his problem and so,

“this might be why he had come home to look for a bride. Was this the kind of man he was? Passing off shoddy goods to the innocent east? She did want to know this answer.”(186).

In this new place, away from her homeland, she feels liberated *“Her life was her own. She didn't owe anybody any explanations”* (273). For Nina, marriage to Ananda was the bedrock of her life in Canada and she realized it well. She tries to get satisfaction through her extramarital affair with Anton but she soon gets disillusioned as she realizes that Anton was simply using her. Nina's library course makes her independent and after her mother's death back in India, she feels free to take decisions of her life as it would affect nobody. Nina refreshes as an independent person who takes the responsibility of her own life and also on a foreign land. It is her education and her job that help her to be an independent person.

Kapur's protagonists are well educated and their education leads them to independent thinking. It helps them to take a bold stand against the society. They understand the value of education as it is the only way to self-reliance, identity and survival. In spite of getting education and freedom the woman protagonist of Manju Kapur's novel does not blossom into new woman in the real sense. All of them fall in love first and their search for their self-identity becomes the second thought. They struggle between tradition and modernity. Marriage proves to be disastrous plunging them deep into melancholy, depression and despair. But in some place, the mere education and financial independence are not enough to tackle the problem, to come out of the caged life, to lead their independent life, to lead their life successfully and to lead their family life successfully.

For Manju Kapur marriage in a women's life is not only a need but also a direction towards a new goal. Kapur allows her female characters to live the life within the cultural restraints prescribed by Indian Society. At times some of her characters break the barriers and feel a new wave but the result with most of them is inner conflict. The change they acquire through their feel of independence turns out to be a temporary phase. As Kapur is aware of this conflict between tradition and the 'new wave', she hints at the change and foresees cultural dilemma. The theme of marriage is the nucleus around which move different issues related to marriage, the foundation of man-woman relationship.

Beena Agarwal in the introduction of her book, *Women Writers and Indian Diaspora*, comments on the female experience as an immigrant:

Culture ideologies are gender specific and women's predicament in a state of cultural geographical shift generates a complex pattern of feminine mystique. The distinction arises out of three components;

- a) The realization of inferiority as women,
- b) Realization of insecurity for their inaccessibility to western cultural values and
- c) The strong bonding with the national cultural identity coupled with the exceptional sensibility for personal relationship (Agarwal.3).

Due to the geographical shift of locations, these women who immigrate with their husbands, suffer not only the insecurity in the culture that is alien to them but also they are caught between the two worlds that gives rise to a kind of suffocation resulting from their inability for adaptation in the new world. Their limitations with the language, food habits and lack of known surroundings make them more vulnerable to the feelings of alienation and exile. Nina suffers alienation but is more adaptive to the new world. Kapur, in her characterization of Nina and her battle to adjust in an alien land reminds of 'Ashima' in Lahiri's novel,

"From being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize is a sort of lifelong pregnancy-a perpetual wait, a constant burden(The Namesake).."

Along with the theme of marriage, Jhumpa Lahiri and Manju Kapur deal with the themes related to the diasporic experiences of her characters. These themes include alienation, rootlessness and belongings, loneliness, issues of identity, dislocation, relocations and assimilation into the host culture. Through her first generation immigrants and second generation immigrants, she brings out the problems of adaptation and adjustments in the host culture. The first generation immigrants exhibit the poetics of exile, alienation, loss resulting in trauma and nostalgia for their homeland. The second generation immigrants is the promoters of reaffirmation and assimilation and the third generation immigrants are the most confused ones about their identity as well as to their state of belonging.

Apart from the husband wife relationship, Kapur explores relationship within or outside the family is the brick of the society, relationships are not only bonds but they are emotions connecting people. In all her novels, apart from the husband –wife relationship, the mother daughter relationship is brought out well. Mothers, in all her novels are the mouthpieces of the patriarchal system of India. The relationships are not at all smooth ones; they are something at once full of love and at the same time full of anger. It is an intricate relationship with many love-hate layers of feelings.

Nina's mother is also a typical Indian mother who wants a husband and home for her educated daughter. In The Immigrant, the mother-daughters are more like friends, sharing, caring and supporting each other. After Nina's father's death, the mother and daughter were

left with no choice but to move to grand parents' house in Lucknow. Nina and her mother struggled and suffered for years before Nina got a job and settled in Delhi.

'Seven years and six months to find this room in Jangpura Extension, and bring her mother to live with her. In Delhi Nina hoped her mother would lead a fuller life; in Delhi her mother imagined a husband could be found who would give her darling the home she deserved.'(5, 6).

Nina's marriage to Ananda, leaves her mother lonely. The separation of a mother from her daughter was certainly painful. They had been each others support after her father's death. Nina could see her mother's sorrow,

"Every glance at the sad pathetic had been her mother's life since her father's death, now that life was going 10,000 miles away."(102) .

The distance seems to be a curse when Nina hears about her mother's death. Nina thinks of her mother's last moments,

"She was sure her mother's last thoughts had been of her. Had she felt alone, frightened? She had been found dead by her old friend, the landlady.... Around and around her heart these images circled, that hand reaching for a glass of water, those feet groping for their slippers, the glass slipping and breaking, the arm brushing against the jug as the body sank back on bed".(321).

Nina's mother had promised her to visit Nina's house once she became pregnant but that does not happen and her death leaves Nina's dream of ideal future of her mother, daughter and the grandchild together in Halifax, shattered. She feels helpless for not being able to do anything for her mother. Her mother's death leaves Nina with nobody in the world to answer to and Nina gets the courage to take her decision of separating from Ananda.

The novelists wish is not to break the family. They show the way to lead an independent life. Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and many other woman writers as an individual rebelling against the traditional role, breaking the silence of suffering, trying to move out of the caged existence and asserting the individual self.

The novels of Manju Kapur voice well the sentiments of women and their self-introspection. The female characters quest for self-identity, struggle for economic independent existence and her equality with men depend upon social ethos. No one can deny the fact that women are treated as entity several times in their life, their sentiments and emotions are mostly ignored.



As Sushila Singh says her opinion on *The Immigrant* ‘*With this fourth novel of hers, Manju Kapur once again proves that she is a master delineator of the complex Indian life*’.(337). *The Immigrant* rightly focuses on the sufferings of innocent Indian Women, who face the realities in a new world with no one support them legally or psychologically.

The immigrants who have migrated for one reason or the other. The male characters come to the new land for pursuing their studies or for some jobs. The female characters follow them being married to them. The new land is more challenging for the female expatriates, as they suffer the trauma of being away and disconnected from their family and relatives. The immigrant which focuses more on the problems of the immigrants in adjusting to the radically different life style –style in Canada than exploring the complexities of Indian life. Manju Kapur explores the special challenges facing immigrant wives: the way of a young woman’s life, already so pressured in professional reproductive terms becomes an even more impossible balancing act inside a foreign culture.

Kapur says,

“These immigrants live in two minds. Outwardly they adjust well. Educated and English speaking, they allow misleading assumptions about a heart that is divided”.
(120)

The immigrants willingly want to be parts of the new culture by changing their personality. They try their best to change themselves, but in the new world people may have some strange types of norms for the immigrants, therefore that immigrants are facing the conflict within their own mind to accept it or reject it. They compare it with their own norms, yet often they fail to get any solution or any concrete answer. This dilemma of acceptance or rejection of norms runs through their whole life in the new culture. Their identity swings between two cultures. Their identity becomes a mixture that is not fully accepted either by new culture or even by their own culture. They live in a very strange type of identity. They think that they are accepted by the new culture, but their acceptance in new culture always remains questionable. They fail to end up this dilemma, remain in double identity and face more and more painful sufferings.

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