



Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*: A detailed study from discrimination to identity formation of women in diaspora

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Abstract

This paper discusses about the immigrant issues of Indian women in *The Immigrant* by Manju Kapur. It is about thirty one year old spinster, Nina, who lived with her widowed mother in Delhi. She gets married with Ananda, a NRI, Dentist and fly to Canada to start her new life. The paper here is about the life of a married woman, with her husband alone to talk with, all alone in an alien land where Indian Culture and Individualism has often remained alien ideas. Migration separates one from their mother land towards an alien land, where it is marked by new culture and new adjustments. Nina soon ditches her saris in favour of sweat pants, what proves more difficult is adapting to the alien rituals of married life. The loneliness and feeling of being uprooted rotates the character of traditionally brought up, Nina. Finally we find a complete change in the personality and mentality of Nina and she develops a new dimension towards life and moving ahead.

Keywords: migration, loneliness, frustration, nostalgia, uprooted, transformation, alien, homelessness, identity crisis

Introduction

Manju Kapur, the most prominent and popular contemporary novelist of Indian English Literature. She deals with various themes such as Feminism, Diaspora, Social and Economic Forces, Gender relationships, and lesbianism. *The Immigrant* (2008) was shortlisted for the India Plaza Golden Quill Award and the DSC Prize of South Asian Literature in 2010. The word 'Diaspora' originated from the Greek word, 'Diaspora' meaning, 'a dispersion'. Diaspora may be defined as dispersion of people, language or culture that was formerly concentrated in one place. Diasporic people carry with them a profound sense of attachment with their former place of residence. Bill Ashcroft and others define diaspora: "Diaspora, the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions, is a central historical fact of colonization" (69). Migration of the people from one country to other is easy in transportation but hard to adjust in alien culture, far from one's homeland. The home and identity are very important for everyone. The people who live in alien culture are very connected to their root and to their respective native countries. They have a separate room for their home country in their heart. Manju Kapur chose Canada as the background for her novel *The Immigrant* and discusses the Indian diaspora in Canada. Here, in this paper we will especially focus on diasporic experiences of her female character Nina, what kind of discrimination she faces in Canada and how she manages to possess an identity of her own. Sankaran Ravindran rightly observes about these Indians immigrants: "Indian abroad are not just people abroad. They are bundles of attitudes, convictions, anxieties, shared nations, fears and anticipations, all of which are Indian in their very texture" (131). The present study focuses on the concept of female identity in diasporic fiction. After migration, women get doubly displaced from their home as well as homeland. This

displacement sometimes helps women to become liberated but this can also lead to their breakdown. *The Immigrant* is the story of transformation of Nina and her quest for autonomy and identity in the hostland. Her distressing marital relationship and her immigrant experiences play a significant role in her identity formation and re-formation. Dr. Beena Agarwal points out that, "On one hand the phenomena of migration has helped to break the barriers of traditions; it has also made the life of Indian woman more complex. Indian woman with her traditional moral consciousness and limited professional skills find herself more isolated and insecure" (10).

The central figure of the novel is 30 years old Nina who is an English teacher at Miranda House, New Delhi. Nina lives in a one room apartment at Jangpura Extension, Delhi with her widowed mother. Nina is financially self-reliant yet like all other Indian daughters she is a burden on her mother, she is a liability, a responsibility. Nina's mother is also looking forward to her daughter's marriage. Friends and neighbors' greetings on her birthday irritate Nina. She knows that, "every marriage is (not) a good news for Indian men (are) mother-obsessed, infantile, chauvinist bastards" (9). Ultimately search of Nina's mother of a bridegroom takes her to the door of an astrologer whose advice harnesses new hopes in the mother's heart. At last, an NRI match is found and Nina after the courtship of a few months is married to a Canada based Indian dentist.

Nina, at home, has to stand against the patriarchal set-up of the Indian middle-class society, but she, on the other hand, has to fight against her loneliness, frustration and the western ethos. The novel is set in the 1970s when Nina after marrying Ananda, reaches Halifax, Canada. She sacrifices her job of a lecturer which in reality is her loss of identity. Actually Kapur in *The Immigrant* focuses on the NRI marriages where women

are uprooted and move to live in some alien land. Consequently women suffer from frustration, disappointment and nostalgia. They are found engaged in their search for their lost selves. It becomes very difficult for Nina to survive in foreign land as her teaching degree is useless in Canada. Moreover, their marriage fails to give them children. From here begins a woman's struggle for her existence. Her reading habit fails to keep her engaged and she like other aliens feels alienated and caught in the flux of eastern and western values. Once Ananda rightly called her as "the perfect mix of east and west" (86). Kapur also writes, "Her devotion to her mother and her willingness to consider an arranged introduction proved her Indian values, while her tastes, reading, thoughts, manner of speech and lack of sexual inhibition all revealed western influences" (86).

Like other immigrants, Nina also feels isolated. She has lost her home and her job. She cries, "I miss home — I miss a job — I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife" (237)? Nina's feeling of loss takes her to a group of women who work on feminist principles. Her distress resulting from her being without job in a foreign country and also her failure in conceiving make her to wail before Beth. "Everything is very strange", she said in a rush, "I used to be a teacher, in fact I taught for ten years before I came here. And now I do nothing. I have not even been able to conceive. Am I locked into stereotypical expectations? I don't know" (232).

Assimilation or acculturation is the only remedy which can help the immigrants to find themselves in the comfort zone. Some immigrants constantly try to adopt quickly the alien culture. But gender bias or racial discrimination which they are subjected to make their stay in a foreign country unpleasant. After her marriage with Ananda, Nina goes alone to Halifax and her first experience at the Toronto airport has been very unpleasant where she passes through a rigorous process of close examination. She had been asked various questions by the immigration women which she thought were all irrelevant. To Nina, her first experience to this new world was unpleasant. She being a teacher was used to respect but here a different yardstick is used to judge her. She feels humiliated. Kapur vividly describes her mental state. She writes, "Rage fills her. Why were people so silent about the humiliations they faced in the West? She was a teacher at a university, yet this woman, probably 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" (108). Despite of having all papers in order, she is treated badly just because she is an Indian whereas "they would not treat a European or American like that" (111). The cross-examination Nina gets at the airport agonized her and she resents the injustice of her treatment. She is treated like a criminal simply because she is of 'wrong colour' and comes from 'the wrong place'. In a state of exasperation, she voices her resentment by writing a note to her husband:

This is not your country. You are deceived and you have deceived me. You made it out to be a liberal haven where everybody loved you. This woman is looking for a reason to get rid of me. I am the wrong colour, I come from the wrong place. See me in this airport, of all the passengers the only one not allowed to sail through

immigration, made to feel like an illegal alien. (108)

It is not that men do not suffer in a foreign land, but women suffer much more intensely and go through greater humiliation. Thus the scene changes if an immigrant is a wife who finds herself at a loss in a foreign country. Kapur rightly comments, "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" (124). Nina in Halifax also passes through the same dilemma as "at present all she is, is a wife, and a wife is alone for many many hours" (124). All luxuries or facilities which the place provide lose their charm and she feels that she is an immigrant. She, like other immigrants, becomes nostalgic and longs for a home. "She longed to breathe the foul air, longed to sit in a scooter rickshaw and have every bone in her body jolted" (179). Nina feels stressed and not ready to welcome changes which were so thorough that she feels 'rootless', 'branchless'. She then begins to cry and feel homesick and forlorn.

Eventually Nina tries to assimilate herself with Western culture. She learns to break her solitude. She buys books from the grocery shop to fill her time. But reading books also fails to distract her. It seems her mundane and boring. She, in order to find herself out, begins to wear jeans and eat meat. She joins a library course so that she could remain engaged. But here she enters into an extramarital relationship which ends on a date rape. At the outset, Nina feels guilty after the first sexual encounter with Beth. She begins to ponder what she had done. But soon she rationalizes herself when she says that she has done what she likes. She thinks:

That she like, she had lived. Who can feel guilty about living? Judging from the evidence, and the sexual therapy centers, every citizen in North America regarded good sex as their unalienable right. It was her right too. (263)

There was a time when Nina used to think that the Westerners have their own standards and she has hers and never the twain shall meet and also that a woman's fulfillment lies in birth and motherhood. Nina, like other Asian women, feels insecure without children. But soon she learns to live for herself and sets herself free from a conservative thinking of motherhood etc. The same Nina who earlier used to see the shadowy figure of her own child in the preschoolers, who used to talk of motherhood, infertility treatments, who was anxiously waiting to be pregnant and whom her husband regarded conservative and 'the true Indian' adapts herself to the new country's requirement. Now her library course and job become her priority.

Nina's life passes through certain ups and downs. She lost her mother, she feels defenseless. Only Ananda seems to be her solitary anchor in Canada. But next morning all her dreams are shattered when she finds a wavy blond hair next to her pillow. It now tells the story of her husband's transgression. She thinks of her transgression which has been against a faithful husband but the discovery of yellow hair makes it clear that their marriage "was based on more than one person's lies" (328). Nina now feels relieved and enjoys her regeneration. She sets herself free from the yoke of matrimony

and social sanction. She decides to be by herself away from her husband, thinking that independence would facilitate her thought processes. She is now an independent, self financially, self-sufficient and socially acceptable. She goes away from Halifax and thinks of all those who have been quite nice to her but feels that they were all temporary. The novelist describes,

She thought of those who had been nice to her, wayfarers on the path, nothing permanent, but interacting with them had made that stretch easier. Colleagues at HRL, the woman'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. (333)

Nothing is steady and stable in foreign land. If one thing fails, the immigrant tries another. An immigrant cannot go back. The book ends with a message which can make the immigrants' journey pleasant, "The continent was full of people escaping unhappy parts. She too was heading towards fresh territories, a different set of circumstances, a floating resident of the Western world" (334).

The last few words may reverberate through an immigrant self and provide a vintage ground in the hollow land - "When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull up your shallow roots and more. Find a new place, new friends, a new family. It had been possible once, it would be possible again" (334).

Conclusion

Kapur beautifully portrays the psyche of Nina in her novel. She minutely analyses her thought process so sensitively that the reader begins to equate her with her characters. Time and again, people in a foreign land languish for their motherland so much so that even things they used to despise during their stay in their native country often tempt them. So in concluding line it can be said that Manju Kapur artistically handle the theme of discrimination to identity formation of Nina in diaspora and successfully highlights the Indians and Indian culture in Canada in the second half of the twentieth century in her novel *The Immigrant*.

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