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FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES: A STUDY OF MANJU KAPUR'S *THE IMMIGRANT*

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ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur is one of the conspicuous Indian English writers who has tried to delineate the gender issues perturbing woman in general and Indian woman in particular. Most of her works show her heroines pitted against the conventional patriarchal setup, trying to search for a space for themselves. *The Immigrant* is her fourth novel in which she talks of the typical immigrant psyche, the struggle towards acculturation and assimilation and the resulting frustration. The present paper attempts to examine Kapur's portrayal of the characters as people living with fragmented identities and the pangs associated with it.

Key words: Diaspora, Acculturation, Immigrant, Identities

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INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur is one of the most distinguished Indian English writers of the contemporary times. She has been able to make a mark with her five novels written in the last two decades. Her stories mostly hover over frustrations, refusals, retaliations and breach of conventional expectation. *The Immigrant*, published in 2008, is her fourth novel. With her profound understanding of human nature, Kapur discusses a wide range of issues in this work of hers. Commenting on the themes of the novel, Anupama Chowdhury (2010) observes, "socio-political problems of contemporary life portrayed in terms of individual's quest for identity and freedom along with a sensitive handling of issues like gender, sexuality and diaspora make *The Immigrant* a novel with a difference" (41).

The protagonists of the novel have been portrayed as individuals oscillating between two diverse identities, and trying to negotiate between these two extremes. They have been born and brought up with a system of values that has given them an identity. But at the same time they are trying to imbibe a different identity while attempting to adjust in the new land. The experience of expatriation gradually disconnects them from their roots but does not dislocate completely. The perpetual shift between two states of dislocation and relocation problematises their sustainability in such a situation. (Maitra and Dubey, 2015)

Discussion

The Immigrant is set in the seventies and the story revolves around the Indian couple – Nina and Ananda. Nina is a teacher of English literature at the prestigious Miranda House. She has a flourishing

academic career. She is depicted as still youthful looking and pretty for thirty. She is well educated and financially independent. She is cultured, well read and eloquent. But her mother Mrs Batra is desperate as her daughter has crossed the Indian marriageable age. Though Nina is sometimes bogged down by her mother's expectations, yet "education was a gift and she would not exchange the life of the mind for any humdrum marriage" (Kapur, 3).

Nina loses her father at a very early age, her mother is her only anchorage. When a marriage proposal comes from an NRI dentist settled in Canada, Nina is in a dilemma as to continue with her life that has given her an identity and financial independence or give up everything and leave even her mother for marriage. After much deliberation Nina finally succumbs to the rosy picture Ananda presented to her of her life abroad. "Ananda promised her such a future, laced with choices, edged with beautiful snowflakes that glittered through the distance, promising at the very minimum change, novelty, excitement" (78).

Manju Kapur portrays Nina's character as a mix of both the worlds. "Nina was the perfect mix of East and West. Her devotion to her mother and her willingness to consider an arranged marriage proved her Indian values, while her tastes, reading, thoughts, manner of speech and lack of sexual inhibition all revealed Western influences" (85).

When Nina moves to Canada to settle down with her husband, she faces double alienation, one because of her nationality and the other because of her gender. Humiliation for being an immigrant comes her way first at the Toronto airport. Her first experience with the new world is terribly unpleasant. Kapur vividly describes her mental state. At the immigration clearance counter she is asked to step aside. She writes "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 paperwork. The colour of her skin shouts volumes in that small room. She feels edgy; she is alone with a woman who makes no eye contact, for whom she is less than human. She was a teacher in the 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). In a state of exasperation Nina 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 everyone 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 me feel like an illegal alien" (107).

Nina does not like her introduction to the new world. But her humiliation seems to be at least temporarily drowned in the glitter of the shops, cleanliness of the country and the sense of pride of ownership that gleams in Ananda's eyes. Nina tries her best to adjust to her new surroundings. Her new life, in complete contrast to Indian ways, begins with a sense of freedom, freedom from the probing eyes of family members, servants or landlord. Initially the solitude is pleasing, but soon it turns into loneliness with no one to talk to or share your feelings with. Gradually Nina realizes her helplessness as an immigrant wife. In the words of Kapur, "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, is a wife, and a wife is alone for many, many hours. There will come a day when the house and its conveniences can no longer completely charm or compensate. Then she realizes she is an immigrant for life" (122).

As immigrants fly across oceans they shed their old clothing as new clothes help ease the transition. But women who are not used to western clothes find themselves in a dilemma. If they focus on integration, convenience and conformity they have to sacrifice, habit, style and self-perception. The choice is hard. In Nina's case it takes time to wear down her resistance. But she is able to cope with the new ambience. She gives up her sarees and salwar kameez for sweat pants and jackets.

In order to fill the vacuum in her life, as a typical Indian woman Nina desperately longs for motherhood which does not come her way. She feels hatred for her body and "its female functions like the period, the blood, the cramps, the dry breasts useless and without purpose" (163). It all reminded her of her barrenness. Her frustration is further aggravated with her dissatisfied sexual life with Ananda. Homesickness

sets in and she feels forlorn. Ruth Scurr (2009) explains the challenges of being an immigrant wife as she writes “Kapur deftly explores the special challenges facing immigrant wives: the way a young woman’s life, already so pressured in professional and reproductive terms, becomes an even more impossible balancing act inside a foreign culture.

Nina is not able to persuade Ananda for a medical checkup. Her husband’s indifference towards her problem aggravates her frustration. She is further disappointed when she comes to know about Ananda’s sexual therapy which he had hidden from her. She has already lost her job and her home. She cries, “I miss home – I miss my job – I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?” (233) Nina’s loneliness drives her back to books and she opts for a part time job in a library. She also decides to go for a degree in Library Science which is her first step towards autonomy. This decision gives her an identity other than that of an Indian dentist’s wife. Nina, who earlier used to see the shadowy figure of her own child, talk of motherhood, infertility treatments, was anxiously waiting to be pregnant and whom her husband regarded conservative now adapts herself to the new country’s requirement. Her course and getting a job become her priority. Nina desperately strives to adapt to the novel environment. And in doing so she transgresses the borders of sexual ethics. Commenting on the husband-wife relationship in the novel Bharati Khairnar states, “Manju Kapur presents an absorbing study of several psychological factors which contribute to a barren marital relationship between Nina and Ananda. Intimacy, passion and commitment which form the bedrock of a marital relationship, are conspicuous by their absence in the couple’s relationship as a result of which their marriage runs into troubled waters” (2014).

There was a time when Nina used to think that the Westerners have their own standards and she has hers. She thought of marriage as a means to the fulfillment of womanhood and like other Asian women she felt in secured without children. But soon she learns to live for herself and sets herself free from the conservative thinking. Her dissatisfied sexual life with Ananda leads her to commit adultery. She gets physically involved with Anton and yet is not repentant. “For the first time she had a sense of her own, entirely separate from other people, autonomous, independent. So strange that the sex did not make her feel guilty, not beyond the initial shock. Easy, she was amazed it was that easy. Her first lover had taken her virginity and her second lover had been her husband, her third had made her international” (260). Soofi examines Nina’s evolution as “theoretically, the scope of Nina’s transition from being a weepy barren wife to an independent woman who has sex outside marriage and is no longer dying to make babies is suitably sweeping” (2014). Nina convinces herself thinking that she was not taking anything away from her husband. Her life is hers and she doesn’t own anybody any explanations. This is quite typical of all Kapur’s heroines who want to live lives on their own terms. Be it Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* who develops an affair with a married man and even marries him, or Shagun in *Custody* who leaves her husband and children to start a new life with another man or Astha in *A Married Woman* who gets involved in a lesbian relation and leaves her family in search of freedom. While the other female protagonists of Manju Kapur struggle against the Eastern rigid social setup, Nina’s struggle is a bit different from her predecessors. She, at home, has to stand against the patriarchal set-up of the Indian middle-class society and on the other hand has to fight against her loneliness, frustration and the western ethos. (Ali, 2015).

Nina breaks another taboo when she returns home. When she first came to Halifax, not eating meat was a way of remaining true to her upbringing. In Halifax her vegetarianism is treated respectfully as part of her beliefs, but she feels false every time she concurs with a picture of herself as a traditional, devout Hindu. “After she had had sex with Anton, it seemed especially hypocritical to hang on to vegetables” (266). She finds similarity with her fidelity and vegetarianism to all that is unadulterated and Indian and her infidelity and eating of meat to that which is contaminated and not Indian.

Nina tries her best to adjust in her new world. But things do not happen her way. Anton raping her leaves her shattered. She further breaks down with the death of her mother. When she flows the ashes of her mother in the Ganga, she feels her parents were together now. But her own existence seems poor in comparison. Kapur writes, “her life was her own responsibility, she could blame no one, turn to no one. She

felt adult and bereft at the same time” (323). Finally when her only anchor Ananda betrays her, she is rendered utterly helpless. “It is true that Canada has freed her emotional needs from the yoke of matrimony and social sanction, but her life in Canada becomes the one of a deprived immigrant”, remarks Nitonde (2014). She decides to break away from this yoke of matrimony and leaves Halifax to rediscover a new identity for herself.

Ananda, like Nina, oscillates between two extremes, trying very hard to frame himself according to the alien land. His story starts when he begins his career as a dentist in India. The tragic death of his parents in an accident leave him and his sister Alka orphaned. In his grief he leaves India and co-incidentally he lands in Halifax on the 15th of August, his country’s day of independence, as well as his own liberation from it” (18). Starting off as an immigrant he initially lives with his maternal uncle Mr Sharma and his family. But he quickly learns that family in Canada is not as self sacrificing as in his own country. So he moves to live as a paying guest with Gary Geller, his friend and business partner. Delineating Ananda’s situation Kapur writes, “Weekends were the worst, and he had much time to relive his parents’ deaths. His isolation pressed upon him and numbed his capacity to break his solitude” (35). Yet he tries to make friends and mingle with the crowd, striving to overcome his nostalgic feelings. Meanwhile, this new country is sinking into his heart. He realized, in the words of Kapur, “This was the country to live in, despite the cold, the darkness and the never-ending winter” (27).

Ananda experiences his first sexual encounter with Sue, a Canadian woman, but he fails to carry on this relation for long. Ananda then realizes the need to assimilate into Canadian culture as soon as possible. Assimilation or acculturation is the only solution which can help the immigrants to find themselves in the comfort zone (Singh Chawdhry, 2015). And the first obvious step to do so for Ananda was to become a non-vegetarian. “Carefully he started with a fish – that almost vegetable – taking his first bite of a fillet soaked in lemon and tartar sauce, asking his mother’s forgiveness, but feeling liberated. By the end of the summer he had graduated to processed meats. Culinary convenience entered his life” (36)

Ananda enjoys Canadian cuisine, celebrates Christmas and Thanksgiving. He also changes his name to Westernised Andy. But like a typical Indian he chooses to marry an Indian girl. “The immigrant man needed a wife who would surround him with familiar traditions, habits and attitudes, whose reward was the prosperity of the West and a freedom often not available to her at home” (Kapur, 78) His acquaintances in Canada have a different opinion of Indian marriages. Kapur writes, “that Indian marriages were barbarically arranged, that strangers were forced to cohabit was a universal perception, and there was nothing Ananda could do to change” (83). Yet Ananda tries to console himself thinking that Nina is the best choice for him as she happens to be a perfect combination of the East and the West.

When Nina complains of her ill treatment at the immigration clearance he tries to pacify her saying that she has to accept all that. He takes immense pride in all that is Canadian, aspires to become like his uncle, rich, affluent and typically Canadian. He emulates their attitude and behavior and places the foreigners at a higher pedestal. He prefers to be known as a Canadian and not as an Asian displaced in a foreign land. This is the psyche of the colonized. They look with awe at the colour, the language, habits, all things which are Western, and belittle their own culture, custom and tradition. And this is what Andy does. He sheds off his Indianness and slips into the colour of the colonizer (Kulkarni, 2015).

The same trait is visible in Ananda’s uncle too. Dr Sharma has moved to Canada and has gained citizenship of the country. His wife is a Canadian and their children have been brought up as Canadians. Though happily settled in a foreign land he faces the typical diaspora problem. He lives with the conviction that his children should be exposed to Indian traditions so that they do not forget their roots. So he makes it a point to celebrate Indian festivals in Canada. He celebrates Diwali in the traditional way, dressing his wife in sari and devouring vegetarian food. He even boasts of being one of the founding members of the Indian club. He says, “I realized that if I forgot everything of mine, then who was I? When the children came, it became even more important to keep in touch” (Kapur, 28). Dr Sharma takes his family to Rome, Paris, London, etc every summer, but he could not manage to stay in India for three weeks. When Ananda asks him why he did

not visit India more often, he remarks "The whole country is crawling with disease, filth, flies and beggars. Very disappointing – and from what I hear the country is practically a dictatorship. One should take the best of one's country and leave" (26). Immigrants live with paradoxical behavior. They are always in conflict. On the one hand, they are loaded with great cultural loads and on the other hand, they would like to accept the Western style of living. (Singh, 2015).

Conclusion

Immigration calls for willingness of the mind to assimilate, to adapt oneself to the foreign ethos without abandoning their own selves. Manju kapur has wonderfully delineated the immigrant psyche in this fourth novel of hers. The characters have been very subtly portrayed as having fragmented identities, striving hard to negotiate between two extremes. Be it Nina and Ananda or Dr Sharma, all have been depicted in the same light. Their displacement is not just geographical or cultural but spiritual as well that makes them lose their own selves in their attempt towards assimilation and acculturation. Manju Kapur's other novels can also be analysed in similar lines.

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