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**METAMORPHOSIS OF NINA FROM A VICTIM TO AN EMANCIPATED WOMAN: A  
STUDY OF MANJU KAPUR'S "THE IMMIGRANT"**

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**ABSTRACT**

Manju Kapur, a contemporary Indian English novelist, though hates to be called as a feminist writer, but through all her fictional works she projects the feminist concerns. Her main foot hold is the exploration of the deep recesses of human psyche, going beyond the skin into the constant struggles, raging the soul of human beings at a conscious level and describing the atmosphere of a woman's mind. She delves deep into the intricate issues of life-marital relationships, ideologies, escapism, isolation, subjugation, identity crisis, alienation and above all patriarchy and displacement. Manju Kapur's novels portray how women find ways to develop and assert their womanhood despite the restrictions placed on them. They are shown struggling and defying pro-men Indian society with its patriarchal notions that enforce them towards domesticity and fetters their feet. They are constantly emerging from dependence-syndrome to self-syndrome, asserting their individuality and aspiring self-reliance. They do not bow down by oppressive forces and come out as bold, determined and active.

Although caught in the vicious trap and crisis, Kapur's women overcome the obstacles and finally reach their goal, regain their identity and empower themselves. Their failures; crisis and disintegration act as stepping stones and pave the way for their self-development. Her female protagonists are morphed into new women, who step out of four walls of their homes and create ripples in the intolerant modern world, fights suppression and oppression in all its forms and finally emerge and evolve as a new emancipated woman who is ambitious, revolting, rational, powerful and mixture of traditional and modernity and same is true with Nina- Manju Kapur's female protagonist in "The Immigrant".

Manju Kapur like Mary Wollstonecraft believes in "I do not wish them (women) to have power over men, but over themselves" (A vindication of the right of women's P-81) Like Mary, Manju Kapur has an intense urge to make woman free and emancipated.

The objective of this conceptual paper is to present to the scholarly world the sufferings of an Indian Immigrant Woman, Nina, as depicted by Manju Kapur in her fourth novel, "The Immigrant". I have selected this novel as in it Manju Kapur once again proves that she is master delineator of complex Indian life. She like a true feminist lashes out at patriarchal practices and delineates pain and suffering of her female protagonist Nina due to alienation, patriarchy and cultural displacement and who later on undertakes a tough journey to liberation, to search for her identity and finally ends up breaking all the shackles and social taboos and shakes the foundation

of age old institution like marriage. In this paper, I have tried to illustrate how Nina emerges as a new, postmodern, emancipated woman subverting the male chauvinism and protesting male hegemony.

**KEY WORDS:** Suffering, Loneliness, Double Displacement, Alienated, Patriarchy, Immigrant, New Women, Emancipation.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Indian English Literature represents an important part of the World Literature. In the present day number of Indian English writers contribute substantially to modern English Literature. It is generally agreed that the fiction is the most suitable literary form for the exploration of experiences and ideas and Indian writers are making their mark in this field. In the early days, Indian English fiction was dominated by males like B.C Chatterji, Raja Rammohan Roy, R.K Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand to name a few. These writers were mainly concerned with the down-trodden of the society, the Indian middle-class life and the expression of traditional cultural ethos of India. Later Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor etc over shadowed the field with their versatility. But soon a handful of women writers emerged who contributed significantly to the Indian English Fiction by giving different dimensions to their writings. They have shown their worth in the field of literature both qualitatively as well as quantitatively. They started questioning the prominent age-old patriarchal domination. They concentrated on the social reality of the times; their writings were largely based on realistic ideology and day to day experiences. Since then Indian English fiction has become filled with feminist discourses and nouveau stylistic endeavours. These women writers are engaged in the vital task of creating a new consciousness regarding women in our rapidly changing society. They have focused on the plight of contemporary women to bring forward their venture for emancipation and liberation from the patrilineal social system. Their effective literary works are open protests against the phallogocentric patriarchal culture, the traditions, customs and other cruel impositions which try to disempower women. They have given a strong resistance to male voices, patriarchy, by denouncing the prescribed norms of the society. They have revolutionized the Indian English fiction by including almost all the topics and themes that were considered to be a taboo about a decade ago like sexuality, divorce, extra marital relationships, lesbianism, acceptance of western values and customs etc. Their writings also include identity crisis, diasporic sensibility, immigration, cultural displacement in addition to age old topics like patriarchy.

Today, the works of Kamala Markandaya, Taslima Nasrin, Cornelia Sorabji, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Attia Hosain, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Hariharan, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Bharathi Mukherjee, Manju Kapur, Shoba De, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Nair and many more have left an indelible imprint on the readers of Indian English Fiction.

These prominent women novelists not only delineate the contemporary social, political and economic conditions but also write fiction that closely resemble realities and thus parallels changing issues and situations that Indian women experience. They also project and interpret experience, from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. They have expressed their concern for women and their problems and plights. While doing so, they have analysed the societal-cultural modes and values that have given Indian women their role and image along with their efforts to achieve a harmonious relationship with their surroundings. In due course, they aimed at portraying realistically Indian women's sense of frustration and their alienation. Time and again we see the Indian women as displaced, alienated figures, ground in the mill of convention, domestic injustice and institutionalized tyranny, the victims of their time, of their society, and sometimes of their own romantic illusions. When the woman awakens, she awakens to the absurdity of life which follows the disintegration of familiar reality. Manju Kapur indubitably is not an exception of this type.

Manju Kapur, considered to be the Jane Austen of modern Indian English Literature, born in 1948 in the city of Amritsar, is a daughter of a veteran educationist Raghuvansha Kishore Kapur, who was Vice Chancellor of Sambalpur University. She completed her B.A Honours in English literature from Miranda House College for women at Delhi. Then she went to Canada to take her M.A in English at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. After completing her M.Phil at Delhi University, she joined her alma mater- Miranda House college as a

lecturer in English. She taught English literature for almost 30 years, and then took voluntary retirement from her services and is now a full-time writer settled in Delhi with her industrialist husband Gun Nidhi Dalmia.

Manju kapur has established herself as a novelist of international repute. With six critically acclaimed novels to her credit - **Difficult Daughters, A Married Woman, Home, The Immigrant, Custody and Brothers**, she stands out from the rest of the writers of her age. She won the prestigious common wealth prize for her debut novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998). *A Married Woman* and *Home* both were shortlisted for the Hutch Cross Word Prize for Fiction and *The Immigrant* was shortlisted for DSC prize for South Asian Literature. These novels are translated into many foreign languages such as Dutch, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish in addition to Indian languages like Tamil, Marathi and Hindi.

In her novels, Manju Kapur, has tried to divulge the various ways in which patriarchy relegate women to the periphery and has portrayed the numerous schemes developed by the patriarchs to curb female freedom and independence and same is applicable to her fourth novel, "The Immigrant". It is set in the seventies and apparently revolves around the arranged marriage of Nina and Ananda - an Indian immigrant couple but actually it is the harrowing tale of Nina who suffers because of patriarchy, cultural displacement and double identity. Manju Kapur delves deep into the human psyche and explores very adroitly the dim domains of the conscious and the sub-conscious of her major character, Nina.

The novel "The Immigrant" starts with the clenching impact of patriarchy and its forced implications where the social and gender constructs obsess Nina and her mother. Nina is a victim of dogmatic and rigid patriarchy and is curiously waiting for a marriage proposal. Although Nina earns and has her financial standing, yet like all other Indian daughters she remains a liability on her mother. Her mother's only dream is to see her married and dispose of her responsibility. Here Manju Kapur puts forward the patriarchal concept that woman's education is a trap to hunt down a good husband and become a perfect wife representing Indian womanhood. Thus, marriage is the ultimate institution where all women should enter after the completion of education. Nina is leading an independent life. But with the addition of one more year to her age, she increases her mother's apprehensions as well. Here Nina represents majority of middle class, Indian young ladies who believe yet that marriage is the be all and end all of their lives. No matter what, they believe they are born to get married and to die without it is unthinkable.

In "The Immigrant" one of the main features is the arranged marriage; a patriarchal tradition entrenched in Indian culture. With respect to patriarchy, the institution of arranged marriage is where more often than not, a woman has very little say in the choosing of her husband. If a suitable husband is presented, a woman cannot reject him as it would reflect poorly on her family's reputation and is unacceptable to patriarchal society. However, in this story the prospect and reality of an arranged marriage is romanticized by both protagonists-Ananda and Nina. And it is shown to provide Nina with her own choice and control over her own future. But it is the consequence of this marriage that reflects the patriarchal issues that follow.

Nina Batra, almost thirty, is portrayed as a radiant complexioned girl with jet black hair who sees herself as increasingly off the shelf but then, unexpectedly, a proposal arrives in the form of Ananda, a dentist in Halifax, Canada ..Like all other girls, she too is served as a showpiece along with tea tray in hands. She is supervised analytically by her future sister-in-law if she is an appropriate match for her brother or not. The NRI status of would be son-in-law tempted Nina's mother. So the lecturer in Miranda house ties the nuptial ties with Ananda who has presented himself ; "....as an eligible, well-off professional, settled in the first world country, an honest, upright citizen, a man who understood about caring and sharing, someone Nina would never regret choosing" (*The Immigrant* 72).

Manju Kapur describes Nina's character as an amalgamation 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 influence". (*The Immigrant* 85)

Thus, two get married, Ananda left for Canada leaving his newlywed wife behind to join him later after getting visa. After three months she gets her visa and proceeds to cross the ocean. Apparently, her suffering will

come to an end after marriage but actually it starts as soon as she steps out of her home and country. She faces double alienation, one because of her nationality and the other because of her marriage. Her first experience with the new world is terribly unpleasant. She faces irrational treatment at the immigration clearance counter. There she is asked to step aside due to her Asian features. She waits and the immigration woman later on 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 immigration woman 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 asma'am, no respect is conveyed".* (The Immigrant 106)

This is the first bitter experience of being an immigrant. She feels humiliated, soiled, accused of trying to take something not rightfully hers. She does not like her introduction to the new world which started with her suffering. 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 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".* ( The Immigrant 108)

Thus, Nina's suffering starts as soon as she reaches Toronto and this suffering becomes a part and parcel of her life in Canada. Although she starts assimilating herself, in many ways as guided by her husband, Ananda yet she fails to change completely. She tries to come out of shadow of traditional values and reinvent herself, but it brought along with suffering and pain. Slowly homesickness sets in, and she feels forlorn. She does not have a job, a social life like she had before marriage. She feels lonely at a place 10,000 miles away from her mother and ex-colleagues in Miranda House. To fill the loneliness and boredom in the foreign land she yearns for a child but is unable to conceive. Loneliness drives her to books, which she borrows from a library but after a few days' books are powerless'. Manju Kapur remarks about the immigrant. *"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".* (The Immigrant 22)

Nina's degrees were not of much value there. Having no career, she is identified only as Ananda's wife. Thus, in the process of assimilation, she loses her identity. During pre-marital life, she was having her own identity, a career in teaching, earning respect and self-satisfaction. But after marriage there is no work, no progress in matrimony in terms of an issue. She has nothing except household chores to get involved with. Thus, she feels alienated and finds herself forcefully thrown in the role of a stereotyped woman. Her immigrant status reminds the loss of her aspirations.

Patriarchy is one of the favourite issues of Manju Kapur. Although it is not completely overt in the novel but is explicit. Manju Kapur has given a subtle underlying patriarchal tone to her male protagonist, Ananda and to his actions. Ananda is not seen as one who overtly tries to control and oppress his wife like in a typical traditional patriarchal society. However, through his various attempts to change Nina and steer their lives according to his reasoning, one can notice him trying to control Nina. His need to become all-Canadian heightens his desire to have Nina follow the same path. Ananda is portrayed to be an Indian immigrant man who has successfully integrated in western society and consequently after his marriage with Nina, he makes every effort to change her according to the westernized society.

Ananda wants to transform Nina as he has transformed himself and assimilated into Canadian Culture. He anglicizes his name from Ananda to 'Andy' just to conform his identity to the western culture. Nina cannot comprehend why this is obligatory to fit in with Canadian society. Ananda makes a point to Nina's advantage that her name can be Indian as well as western and she should thus assimilate well in Canada because of that. He now also wants every bit of her to be westernized. Ananda tries to direct Nina's clothing sense, eating habits,

living style and even her desire to have children. Thus, a subtle patriarchal side to Ananda emerges as the story unfolds.

Nina arrives in Canada with her traditional wear, saris and Salwar Khameezes. Much to the dismay of Ananda, she wears them as part of her daily wear as well as for social occasions. She holds on to her Indianness by wearing her traditional clothes. Apart from her own husband, everyone else in the story finds her traditional clothing exotic and beautiful. But Ananda asks Nina to stop wearing saris everywhere as they are too formal keeping the saying "When in Rome do as the Romans do" as his guiding principle. "*Women who are not used to wearing western clothes find themselves in a dilemma. If they force on integration, convenience and conformity they have to sacrifice habit, style and self-perception....in Nina's case it took months to wear down her resistance*" (The Immigrant 150)

Thus, Nina resorts to wearing western clothing. She wears jeans and t shirt. She hates the way western clothes make her feel and look and feels a part of her identity as an Indian woman slowly slipping away. Even though she is not comfortable in her western outfit, but she does not give up the new trend. Just to make Ananda happy, to make friends and for her survival in an alien land she mislays her identity and most valued culture.

Ananda not only tries to change Nina's dressing sense but also tries to control Nina's eating habits as well. Nina is a pure vegetarian and when she finds out that Ananda eats meat, she is slightly appalled. She wants to stick to her act of cooking and eating Indian food. "*Turmeric.....red chillies....onions and garlic....releasing sweet sharp smells.....cumin and coriander....*" Ananda continues to suggest throughout the story that Nina's life would be much more exciting and easier in Canada if she were to conform to eating meat. This is yet another way Ananda tries to control Nina and indirectly and incredulously questions her own decision making on an act as simple as choosing what she should eat. Initially she cooks Canadian cuisine and meat for Ananda while insisting on eating her separately cooked vegetarian meal but later on she partakes of eating fish and eventually meat.

Ananda, being the only earning partner, also controls the finances and pays the bills. The patriarchal tinge to his character is quite evident when he gets angry over the expenditures done by Nina. On one occasion Nina spends three hundred dollars on clothes, western clothes that he encouraged her to buy as he wants her to shun her Indianness. However, upon receipt of the bill, he gets very angry at her and considers it to be frivolous expenditure. He claims that it is very expensive to run a dental practice and that he is still recovering from the wedding debt, insinuating that she shouldn't be questioning him after all that he has done for her financially. He hides that actually he is recovering from a very expensive therapy session and on the other hand from a very financially demanding mistress. Ananda continues to make her feel guilty for spending his hard-earned money. Knowing that she has no proper income of her own, he controls her expenses. This financial control over women is one of the main acts of patriarchal hegemony by men and curtails various aspects of women's life. This financial control suffocates Nina the most, aggravating her pain and targeting her individual identity.

Thus, Manju Kapur has delineated various forms of patriarchy in the novel-individual and systemic: cultural and universal; public and private etc. An example of cultural patriarchy is evident in the novel when Nina and Nina's mother supports the tradition of arranged marriage. An example of universal patriarchy can be observed in Ananda's control over the finances. Individual patriarchy is manifested in the novel in Ananda's control over Nina's clothes and choice of food whereas systemic patriarchy can be exemplified in Nina's inability to find equitable employment and wages. Demonstrating public patriarchy is suggested in Nina's recognition only as wife of Ananda's whereas illustration of private patriarchy is seen in Ananda's control over the issues of household and even parenthood. Thus, Manju Kapur has clearly shown how patriarchy is responsible for Nina's sufferings.

In the initial part of the story, Nina accepts the troubles and sufferings in her marriage as a part and parcel of her life. She decides to flaunt her obedience and support towards Ananda by suppressing her desires. But on the other hand, Ananda keeps Nina in dark and keeps his therapy a secret from Nina. He often goes to California for his treatment without revealing to Nina the actual cause and she is left alone to her fate in the

foreign country. Lethargy tightens its noose on her; it becomes tighter and tighter day by day. Even in the company of her husband she feels isolated and alienated.

Here, Manju Kapur convincingly, captures her alienation in these words; *“Alone, her thoughts grew darker. The hollowness of the landscape reverberated inside her, with no people, no conversation to even glaze the surface. Hour after hour, day after day could pass without single word uttered”* (The Immigrant-186)

Nina feels completely hurt and annoyed with Ananda for keeping not only his visit but the purpose too, a secret from her. This incident puts one more nail in their already deteriorating relationship. Nina’s efforts to adapt both with Ananda, and in Canada make her feel *“root less, branchless, just a body floating upon the cold surface of this particular piece of earth”*. (The Immigrant 176)

Nina’s life is affected by stress and loneliness. Soon she realizes that there is much more in life than husband and she join a course of library studies. Her quest of independence and identity seems a spiritual odyssey of modern woman who has lost her social mooring. Here, she meets people of a feminist group, who encourage her to read works of several feminist writers. She likes their company but still her failure to get job, no children and Ananda’s indifference towards her are too heavy for her to bear. This forces her to search happiness somewhere else. During her course of library studies, she meets Anton who hailed from New York. Both Anton and Nina got closer and Nina surrenders herself whole heartedly; *“For the first time she has sense of own self, entirely separate from other people, autonomous, independent”* (The Immigrant 264)

She feels liberated, more Canadian less Indian and she starts believing in the dictum often quoted by her husband, *“In Rome do as Romans do”* (The Immigrant 27) But her association with Anton also lead her to suffering. Her sense of autonomy and freedom dissolves in air on the recognition that she is being used by Anton. She feels dejected and completely torn.

Anton’s exploiting her and Ananda’s treachery both impacted her drastically but instead of continuing to be a sufferer she decides to take a different path for herself that will be far away from Ananda. She rejects the hegemonic shadow of a dutiful wife and grasps a life as an individual who can live and thrive all around the world. Nina’s completion of 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. She realizes that until she resists the conventional norms that society expects every wife to adhere to, she will not be able to find her happiness. Nina attempts to begin a journey in search of fulfillment, a fulfillment that she earlier desired from her marriage, from her husband and the life that they would create. She now takes the responsibility of her own life. She no longer is dependent on her husband, neither emotionally nor economically. Her education has empowered her to come out of her cocoon and make a room of her own. She no longer is ready to be a captive of conventional social norms. She decides to break free from all the confinements and shackles and steps out of her miserable life, rediscovers herself and finds a life which she always dreamt of.

Nina thus grows to the full stature of a postmodern woman. She packs her bags and ventures on a new path without Ananda as the university of New Brunswick has called her for an interview. She bids good bye to her husband, home and to her past only to start her new life with supreme self-confidence, unflinching courage and determination, robust optimism and sanguine hope. While she takes such an important decision of her life, she is facilitated by the fact that she is not in India; *“The things that might have made separation in India difficult for Nina were hers to command in Canada”*. (The Immigrant 333)

Nina pulled off all bonds that could have held her. She sets herself free from the yoke of matrimony and social sanction. She decides to be by herself, thinking that independence would facilitate her thought processes. She goes away from Halifax and thinks of all those who have been quite nice to her but feels that they were all temporary. She realizes that this; *“was the ultimate immigrant experience not that anything was steady enough to attach yourself to the rest of your life, but that you found different ways to belong, was not necessary lasting, but ones that made your journey less lonely for a while---for an immigrant there was no going back---she too was heading towards fresh territories, a different set of circumstances, a floating resident of the western world.*



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*When one is reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull up your shallow roots and move. Find a new place, new friends, a new family. It has been possible once, it would be possible again.”* (The Immigrant 330-334

Thus, I conclude my paper by inferring that ‘Nina’ is presented as an epitome of emancipation. Her immigrant life has started with her suffering but during this she metamorphoses into a new woman. Her double displacement leads her to self-discovery. Her journey is a journey from sufferer to an emancipated woman; from negation to assertion; from diffidence to confidence and above all from self-alienation to self-identification.

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