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### **Quest of the Displaced in Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* – An outlook**

#### **Abstract**

Manju Kapur, the post-colonial writer, writes about the quagmire the displaced people have encountered in adopting an alternate culture and tradition in the overseas land. Her writings help the reader understand the several traumas that the displaced undergo in the strange land. Kapur, having the experience of an expatriate has focused on themes like dislocation, cultural dilemma, rootlessness, alienation, loss of identity and lack of belongingness. Kapur's fourth novel *The Immigrant* revolves around the traumatic experiences of the displaced people in Halifax, Canada.

Keywords: Alienation, trauma, expatriate, rootlessness, cultural dilemma and dislocation.

Manju Kapur's novel *The Immigrant* is eulogized as an account of the isolated experiences of Nina, the protagonist and her husband in Canada. The novel focuses on the emotional agony of the culturally displaced immigrants in the alien land. It also explores and analyses the problems and the assimilation that takes place later in the life of the immigrant protagonist in Canada. It explores the complexity of identity inherent in the characters. Kapur, being a post-colonial writer, in the novel *The Immigrant*, portrays her protagonist's quest for identity at two levels, one as a female and the other as an immigrant. She considers the quest for identity as a perpetual voyage than a fixed entity. Sushila Chaudhary and Shashi Bansal opine:

The surrounding environments influence the formation of her [Nina] identity and she navigates between temporal and spatial locations, her perception of herself changes, thereby resulting in a multiplicity of consciousness. These create a tension within her and she feels the consciousness. These create a tension within her and she feels the need to reconcile these conflicting perceptions so that they do not wage a psychological war inside her. Thereby we see her reinvest her identity completely. (22)

It is evident that the immigrants have to face a chaotic situation while they are in search of their identity.

Kapur's *The Immigrant*, resonates with issues of displacement, estrangement and cross-cultural conflict. Though the novelist has taken seventies as the background, issues like segregation and displacement portrayed by her, coexist with the present day condition of Indian immigrants who try to adjust life in the west. Stephen Henighan states:

At a time when almost everyone claims to be an immigrant, it is good to read a novel about immigrant experience by a writer who lives in her own country.

The Indian writer Manju Kapur's fourth novel gains clarity and perspective not only from its objective assessment of immigration, but also because the story is set in the 1970s. By returning to an era when to leave one's home was to relegate it to the past, Kapur throws into contrast today's more fluid migrant identities, hybridized by the ways in which technology, affordable airfares and sheer weight of members keep aspects of the old society alive in the new. (21)

Kapur has invested pages to depict how the world and its people change with the passage of time in general and the immigrants in particular.

In the novel, Ananda, Nina's husband, who is a dentist gets a chance to study dentistry in Halifax, Canada with the help of his uncle after his parents' tragic death. He is disturbed and confused whether to join the dental school far there in the west or not. Even his sister comes to the airport to give him a sendoff. She tries to convince and console him saying, if he doesn't like the atmosphere or if he encounters any difficult situation, he can happily return to India. The sister says, "Remember if you don't like it, you can always come back . . . Ananda was mostly silent. His situation had changed so much that he already had the mindset of an immigrant, departing with no desire to return" (18).

People working abroad often suffer a lot as they are segregated, alienated and displaced in all possible ways. One who leaves his native land to live in another finds it extremely difficult to adjust his life there. For anyone, to leave one's native land and live in an alien land is very difficult. Being tired of long journey, Ananda sleeps for hours together in his uncle's house, wakes up at three in the morning and his condition is observed thus "... too scared to make a noise that might disturb, longing for a cup of tea, unable to even find the bottles of drinking water. He was alone, all alone, with relatives who did not wake with the

fall of his feet on the floor, the blood that joined them diluted with the waters of an ocean. The glossy magazine house feel – cold and alien” (20). Ananda’s first day experience in his uncle’s house itself makes him realize that he is estranged. Ananda’s aunty, Nancy tells him, that in Canada, “everybody had to do everything themselves. . . carefully he put on a pleasant expression to mask his humiliation” (20). When Ananda’s aunty tells him that , in Canada, everybody has to take care of his/her needs , the former feels sad , but to conceal his disgrace, he exhibits a glad look.

The writer has skillfully voiced the traumas of non-resident Indians, their identity crisis and cultural differences. As the cost of living in Canada is high, Ananda applies for an educational loan and his uncle comments, “Starting life deeply in debt was the way things were done here, don’t worry you are going to be a qualified dentist” (35). Throughout the summer he feels lonely and the weekends are the worst because that paves the way to relive his parents’ death. Whenever he is in his room during weekends, the thought of his parents and their tragic death haunts him to madness. Besides, his lonely state tortures him even more. Kapur comments, “His isolation pressed upon him and numbed his capacity to break his solitude” (35). Sometimes Ananda undergoes excitement, but suddenly that excitement gets degenerated into loneliness and he grows sick of this inconsistent emotional setback. Uncle Sharma indirectly tells Ananda about his lonely state thus, “Beta, here one is alone. You need a companion” (41). Ananda’s uncle would have felt Ananda’s lonely feeling . That is why, he advices him to marry and have a companion.

Kapur’s *The Immigrant* explores the theme of immigrant experience and the clash of cultures in the west. Her handling of the complexities of the immigrant nuances in a simple and lucid manner undoubtedly establishes her as a mature fiction writer. In Canada, almost all

the works are done by people themselves. They don't hire anybody for plumbing, painting and carpentry. Ananda is surprised to know that, and his friend Gary says, "...truly an immigrant had to be skilled in many things" (44). Indirectly, Gary hints that Ananda should not depend on them. At last, Ananda decides to marry and is engaged to a girl from Delhi named Nina with whom he shares his experience in Canada through letters. He tells her about his socialization with other immigrants. Ananda's wife, Nina and her life stands as a clear example of how dislocation causes insecurity.

*The Immigrant* highlights the NRI marriages where women get displaced and are moved to live in some strange land. There they are twice isolated because of their race and gender. Nina, the protagonist is partly happy, partly sad. She is happy because, she is now in the process of crossing oceans and be one among them and sad because, "She had been her mother's life since her father died, now that life was going 10,000 miles away" (102). After the death of Nina's father, the latter becomes the sole companion of her mother. And now, that companion is to cross miles to join a new companion far there in the west. Nina at last is brought to the Airport by Ananda's sister Alka, her friend Zenobia and Nina's mother. Kapur observes thus, "This was her true vida – to her home, her friend, her job, her mother, everything" (103). Finally, Nina reaches a point, where she has to bid good bye to everything in her homeland, her mother, friends, relatives everybody.

People who go abroad are full of dreams and aspirations to achieve greater heights in life. Sometimes their dreams get fulfilled, whereas, some others face unimaginable traumas from which they hardly come out. Nina gets down at Halifax airport. The woman at the immigration counter examines her. With a look of suspicion, she examines her passport page by page. Besides the paper work, a lot has to be scrutinized because her papers say that she

has married a citizen of Canada. Her immigrant experience is explained thus, “The color 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” (107). Nina feels hurt and oppressed by the treatment meted out to her in the immigration counter. The examination at last is over. Ananda has already given Nina some Canadian currency with which she goes to a restaurant to have some tea. To her, the tea that she drinks is tasteless and lacks flavor. The writer opines, “She does not like her introduction to the new world” (109). She is deprived of her identity at the Toronto airport where she undergoes a severe procedure of close interrogation. Kapur describes the mental agony of her protagonist thus, “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” (108). Nina encounters humiliation in the immigration counter which fills her with anger. Besides, she is bewildered to see the migrants suffering silently without any grudge.

*The Immigrant* shows Nina’s suffering because of her dislocation from India to Canada. Her dilemma is due to the cultural displacement. As Nina feels displaced, she strives hard to relocate herself. Nina finally lands in Halifax and is ready to shed all her burden that she encounters through the long journey. The many questions that are asked to her by the immigration woman disturbs her very much that she, in her mind blames herself for marrying an NRI. She tells her husband, “They were treating me like a criminal. . . . They wouldn’t treat a European or American like that. Why me? . . . They did it because we are third world” (111). Ultimately, Ananda diverts her mind saying, this is what happens around the world.

The newlywed couple spend the night together. Nina is very tired. The next day morning Ananda gets up early for work. She is still in bed. He goes and Nina is left in silence. She is all alone in the cozy bed. The next day they are together in the kitchen. She comes to know that being a vegetarian, Ananda eats meat. Nina complains Ananda that she feels bored after he leaves for work. Kapur says, "Certain Indians become immigrants slowly. . . These immigrants are always in two minds. Outwardly they adjust well. Educated and English speaking, they allow misleading assumptions about a heart that is divided" (123). The above mentioned quote shows the dilemma that these immigrants face in the west. Besides, Nina has to forget the smells, the sights and the sounds that she was used to, to survive in this strange land.

Cultural displacement is also one of the reasons for the protagonist to go in quest of her identity. Ananda, once takes Nina to a film. A man and a woman sit in front of their seats and very often they are seen exchanging kisses which disturbs Nina. It is commented thus, "She marveled at such passion in a public place, while her hand lay in Ananda's, so coy and shy compared to the fecund model in front" (125). Nina is taken aback by the vast cultural variation that she notices in the cinema theatre. The next day Nina gets up late and finds that Ananda has gone. It seems the husband has insisted her not to wake up for him. She is in an unhappy and confused state of mind. She is almost broken by displacement as, ". . . she wondered whether he saw her as an intrusion" (127). But then she makes up her mind that everything will be alright soon.

The new immigrants find happiness in maintaining their relationship with their relatives who are already there in the alien nation. The next Sunday, Ananda's uncle, Mr Sharma invites them for lunch. Nina feels very happy, ". . . and she was keen to set down

roots that would make her feel more at home” (132). When Nina gets invitation from the Sharmas for lunch, her happiness knew no bounds, because, it is the time, when she can become closer with Ananda’s relatives in Canada. At the uncle’s house, his wife tells Nina that earlier Ananda was a vegetarian, but, to avoid cooking he has switched over to fast food. Ananda used to say, “When in Rome, do what Romans do” (135). To Ananda, an individual has to transform himself in accordance with the place of his dwelling. According to R.

Subhashri:

Initially reticent in the alien land, Ananda slowly adjusts to the situation. He has never felt all along in his life caught in such a predicament like making his bed or even making his own meal or getting a loan to set up a clinic. So far being a Brahmin, Ananda dared not eat meat or other evils like drinking or smoking, however, the situation compelled him to change his diet, which was even welcomed by his uncle. (59)

Though, in the beginning Ananda encountered struggles, later he somehow manages to adapt himself in the new land which is acclaimed even by his uncle.

One fine morning, still in bed Nina feels lonely and hopeless. She turns on the radio to hear human voices and listen to a report on the ‘Kumbh Mela’, which used to be held in Allahabad once in every twelve years. When she listens to the report, she feels at home. Whenever Nina feels alienated or dejected, she thinks of the words said by her mother, “Don’t look at the bad side . . . look at the good” (178). Sometimes the loneliness that haunts her is because of her brown color of the third world to which she belongs. Her troubled state is reflected thus, “. . . she felt rootless, branchless, just a body floating upon the cold surface of this particular piece of earth” (178). Whenever Nina is left alone, she thinks of the pleasant

life she would have had in India along with her friends and relatives. The very thought of the native land gives Nina some comfort.

Family conflicts are plenteous in the Indian immigrant families in the west. When misfortunes come, the Indian immigrants' life is thrown out. Initially, it was Nina who was very much eager to initiate treatment for conception. But now the situation takes a reverse order. Nina is confused and uninterested to bear a child. Often she tells her husband, "I miss home – I miss a job – I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?" (237). The question of existence occurs in the protagonist's life, whether the life that she leads is an illusion or reality. When Nina comes to Canada, she never consumes meat. She is often praised by people as a strong vegetarian. But, when she joins the library, and gets acquainted to Anton, both have sexual contact. Kapur says, "After she had had sex with Anton, it seemed especially hypocritical to hang on to vegetables" (270). Want of sexual satisfaction leads the protagonist indulge in extra – marital affair. Nina is denied sexual satisfaction by her husband because of his premature ejaculation. That is the reason why she finds happiness and satisfaction when she indulges in sexual act with Anton.

One day, Ananda gets a phone call from his sister. Nina senses that something is wrong. She gets worried and compels him to tell the matter. After great difficulty, he discloses that her mother passed away by a massive heart attack. Nina feels broken. She lies down on the bed and sobs heavily. The emotional support which was given to Nina by her mother is snatched away by the latter's death. She now becomes 'anchorless' in the foreign land. Ananda enquires his sister about the funeral. Nina feels sick in India and returns to Canada. The diasporic community is at a disadvantageous position with regard to family functions and unexpected happenings back in the motherland. Ananda treats her very kindly

and tells her that he missed her. She takes a deep sigh and says, "Now there is only you" (327). After her mother's death, Nina is dejected and has hope only in her husband. Except Ananda, there is nobody on whom she can have her trust or hope. The very next morning, to her great surprise, while making the bed, she finds a blond hair next to her pillow. The hair explains so many things. Nina is upset. After she comes to know of Ananda's secret affair with Mandy, she is shattered. The condition at home seems oppressive because of which, Ananda fears to come home.

The novel shows the domestic dilemmas resulting out of contradictions between Indian and Canadian style. The immigrant experience of the depressed immigrant, Nina is observed thus, "He had done so much for her, and all she could do was sit there with a long face, and behave like a deprived immigrant" (330). She is not in a condition to free herself from Ananda because, "Her sense of security in Canada lay with him" (332). Nina doesn't want to live with Ananda, but, she cannot leave him at once and take care of her survival. The land where she lives at present is an alien land. Already, she has encountered difficult times with an alien. So, at this juncture she is helpless. Nina thinks of a life without husband, which is full of pain and solitude. But still, she has hope that she can survive. She attends interviews, travels away from Halifax, her husband, her roots and everything. To her, nothing seems permanent. Everything looks temporary. Kapur says, "Perhaps that was the ultimate immigrant experience. Not that any one thing was steady enough to attach yourself to for the rest of your life, but that you found different ways to belong, ways not necessarily lasting, but ones that made your journey less lonely for a while. When something failed it was a signal to move on. For an immigrant there was no going back" (333). On the whole, for an immigrant, going back to the native land is indeed difficult. And, the only way out is to move forward.

The predicament of an Indian woman in her immigrant position who faces the challenges in her life that too, in the alien soil is narrated skillfully by the novelist. The NRI sensibility and the experience of myriad Indian educated women who wed the Indian migrants is probed through in *The Immigrant*. The novelist thus makes the reader have a broader perspective of the issues and themes investigated.

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