

A Gender Analysis of Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*

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Abstract:

The history of civilization has been the history of women oppression and her marginalization. All religions produced by the patriarchal societies have been the most effective instruments of male chauvinism. This subservience of women from the primitive times and the consequent differentiation made between the two sexes according to their gender identity is evident in the Indian society too. In Indian society, a woman's role has been compartmentalized as a daughter, a wife and a mother. She has never been acknowledged as an individual outside these pre-destined roles. Over the decades, however, the position of Indian woman has undergone a transformation, where she appears to be aware, awakened, assertive and empowered. Manju Kapur is a contemporary woman novelist who has projected this transgression in a woman's life in her novels, from a state of subservience to self-actualization. In *The Immigrant*, she has delineated this metamorphosis in the life of her female protagonist, Nina who eventually is awakened to her subjugation in marriage and asserts her individuality. The present paper will highlight a woman's struggle and quest for her identity in a patriarchal society.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Gender Identity, Gender Roles, Marriage, Economic empowerment and Transgression.

Women have always been defined in familial terms, connoting their life in relation to family and their identity is derived from the relationship to the explicitly gendered categories of being a mother, a daughter and a wife. Cultural practices have always played a pivotal role in the subordination of women, as there are implications of power and control mechanisms embedded in culture, which reinforces the gender inequality. 'Gender' is

a social construct which connotes that the capabilities, roles, expectations and behaviour of the two sexes is different due to their biological differences. Family as a social institution is the brewery for the childhood that perpetuates gender differences among the children since the inception of their childhood. To preserve the male- hegemony, the Indian society created 'feminine' and 'masculine' traits for both sexes, where, "Man is full in movement, creative in politics, business and culture. Woman, on the other hand is passive. She stays at home, as is her nature" (Padia 4).

Manju Kapur is a contemporary woman novelist, who has used fiction as a medium to illustrate the struggle of urban women in the Indian society to attain equality and an independent status in the family and the society. Her works project the transgression of a silent and a submissive woman to an assertive, awakened and an empowered woman, who gradually defy patriarchal norms.

The Immigrant by Manju Kapur revolves around an Indian married couple, Ananda and Nina and the issues that surround their married life. The novel discusses the theme of a woman's struggle for equality and an independent identity in the web of gender norms. The first half of the novel is set in New Delhi and the latter half in Canada in the seventies. Nina is a teacher of English literature at Miranda House and lives with her widowed mother. The story begins just before her thirtieth birthday and Kapur projects her mother's anxiety about her daughter's unmarried status. The tradition of marrying daughters early in India is widespread, as marriage fetches a social status to a woman. "For girls marriage is the only means of integration in the community, and if they remain unwanted, they are socially viewed, so much wastage" (Beauvoir 447). Conversely, a woman whose marriage is delayed is criticized and often considered a burden on the parents. Nina is caught in a conflicting situation, where she does not wish to leave her widowed mother and get married. Nina's mother's restlessness soon ends when a suitable marriage proposal for Nina from Halifax comes. Ananda is a dentist and lost his parents when he was young. His sister approaches Nina's mother for marriage proposal. This news, however does not give much happiness to Nina, as she does not wish to leave her mother alone and leave her job too. She, however, agrees to get married for her mother's happiness. "Nina had not realized that being thirty would be so difficult. Actually she had expected to go on feeling young alone and strong till she died" (49).

Marriage for women in the Indian society is defined as the second birth for her as it brings a complete transformation in a woman's life, where she has to adjust in a

new family and perform her marital responsibilities. In Hinduism, marriage has been idealized as one of the essential *sanskaras* (sacrament) for both the genders and for a woman it is her destiny. A woman is defined as the *Ardhangini*, emphasizing the oneness with her husband but till date she is a subservient partner in marriage. “They exist in relation to a particular male principle and it is their mission to cement that principle” (Nabar 34). A girl is conditioned by her mother at the time of her wedding that her husband’s home is her home now and she has to adjust in her new home and keep her in-laws happy.

Every young girl, after marriage has colourful dreams about the idea of love and marriage, which very often crumbles down because she is perceived in terms of her gendered identity than an individual. Nina after marriage settles in Halifax and finds it difficult to adjust in a new culture, where her dressing sense is looked down upon by Ananda and the Western people. “For the first time in her life she felt out of place. Wrong clothes, shoes, handbag. May be in their eyes she was like the woman sweeping” (104). Nina besides adjusting with the new culture also adjusts with Ananda, who begins exercising his dominance over Nina. Kapur has focused on the NRI marriages, where both men and women are uprooted from their culture and then have no time for each other. Further, they do not understand each other’s nature and desires.

Nina after trying to adjust in her marital role, gradually is awakened to her subservient status and undergo the dilemma of identity crises, that motivates her to achieve an economic empowered state. Nina, however is discouraged by Ananda, who asks her to prioritize his wish to have children first, than her career. He says, “Don’t be silly. We are starting a family_ What is the point?”(143). Manju Kapur has projected the various mechanisms employed by men, which prevent a woman from desiring a career for herself and motherhood often ties a woman to maternal responsibilities. Children become a device for men to enchain women forcefully in marriage as observed by Germaine Greer, who affirms, that men may, “Even determine to impregnate her to break her self-sufficiency” (244). Cultural norms deeply affect the working of gender norms and limits her role limited to a wife and a mother. A woman is relegated to the realms of familial submission and at every stage in marriage, she is denied to grow and fulfill her potential as a human being. According to Jean Baker Miller, an American Psychologist, men can never accept women as their equals because:

When

women start realizing their own interests and self-growth, men

feel intuitively threatened by the danger of the loss of essentials that

women have been carrying for the total society.(120)

Nina, however ignores his decision to be confined indoors and begins looking for a job. She , however, gets disappointed to know that her teaching degree is not sufficient in Halifax and joins Killam library to obtain a degree of a librarian and join a university to become economically empowered. Manju Kapur through the character of Nina suggests that the economic empowerment of a woman helps her to attain an independent identity and ushers confidence in a woman to execute her decisions and copes up with her personal problems all by herself. Her loneliness instead of making her weak, makes her strong enough from inside to manage her life on her own terms. Women like Nina assert their individuality and articulate their choices. They eventually cast off their age-old shackles of serfdom and resist all forms of exploitation in the name of marriage.

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