

A Study of Diverse Immigrant Perspectives and Experiences through the Novel the Immigrant by Manju Kapur

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Abstract:

The present paper explores the diverse perspectives and experiences of the immigrants who are navigating at the borders of two cultures – of the homeland and of the hostland. The novel *The Immigrant* by Manju Kapur is scrutinized to understand the extent of isolation and emptiness in the lives of the major characters. The diverse perspectives of various characters namely Nina, Ananda, Dr. Sharma etc. are focused to comprehend the harsh and critical realities of lives of diaspora abroad. The study examines the complexities of emotional disconnection, inner turmoil, expectations, cultural shock, nostalgia for the homeland and its culture and values and also the assimilation of various characters with the host society. It also reveals that while initially the heroine of the novel, Nina, suffers from emotional isolation but her husband, Ananda, adapts himself to the needs of the hybrid culture. It is also seen that a tenuous chord of helplessness sustains the pressure of strained survival in the strange lands. It is concluded that the assimilation is the better option for the comfortable existence in the host society.

Keywords: Immigrants, perspectives, experiences, culture, emotional disconnection, cultural shock, nostalgia, emotional isolation, assimilation.

Manju Kapur, born in 1948 in Amritsar, Punjab, completed her graduation from Miranda House University College for Women and then she migrated to Halifax, Nova Scotia for M.A. degree from Dalhousie University. She did her M.Phil from Delhi University, India. She began her literary journey in her 40s by contributing her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* in 1998 which was rewarded the distinguished Commonwealth Prize for the best first novel, Eurasia region and was even the bestseller in India, USA and England. Her next novel *A Married Women* (2003) was shortlisted for the Encore Award. Her third novel *Home* (2006) was nominated for the Hutch Crossword Book Award in 2006. Her fourth novel *The Immigrant* (2008) was a finalist for the India Plaza Golden Quill Award and the DSC Prize of South Asian Literature. Her fifth novel *Custody* (2011) was adapted into television series “Yeh Hai Mohabbatein”. She mainly dealt with the themes of immigration, feminism, gender relationships etc. Her present novel for study *The Immigrant* portrays the life of diaspora in the multicultural society of Canada. The term ‘diaspora’ pertains to the group of people who migrate to the foreign lands in search of better social, cultural and economic prospects. The definition of the word ‘diaspora’ given by Oxford dictionary is, “the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country”.

Interestingly, with the surge in the movement of people from diverse realms of the world to the developed nations, the diaspora literature has become a widely acknowledged field of research these days. The diasporic writers residing in the different regions have mirrored the realities of the lives of the migrants who have left behind their roots and culture to assimilate or integrate with the hostland society. They illustrate the numerous issues like alienation, nostalgia, loneliness, cultural shock, cultural clash, identity crisis etc. encountered courageously by the migrants with the aspiration of enlightening their future and getting rich.

In her novel, *The Immigrant*, Manju Kapur narrates the story of two Indians—Ananda and Nina, who immigrate to Canada in diverse circumstances. The loss of Ananda's parents in a road accident compelled him to journey towards the West for his dental study and for his improved career prospects. His maternal uncle, Dr. Sharma, a dentist in Canada, assisted him in his initial set up in Canada. On the other hand, Nina, a spinster of thirty years migrated to Canada to live with her husband, Ananda. After earlier struggle in Canada, Ananda easily adapted himself with the culture, life and demands of the Western world. However, the traditional upbringing of Nina hindered her complete assimilation with the Canadian society as she was in the grip of her Indian roots, culture and identity.

While unfolding the psychological and emotional turmoil of the characters of the novel, Manju Kapur reveals the real perspectives of Indian diaspora regarding their assimilation with the Western society. In their struggle to keep their dual identity intact they suffer from many physical, cultural and emotional losses. Still some immigrants like Nina couldn't adapt themselves fully with the system and suffer dejection and loss whereas the immigrants like Ananda are obsessed with the idea of thoroughly assimilating with the Western society and they aspire to be called Canadians. Hence, Ananda thought himself to be a perfect fit in the Canadian society. He even focused on changing the traditional dressing style and thought pattern of his wife, Nina. He said:

‘Here I'm thought of as a cultured man, as Canadian as everybody else. So I don't want folks to get the wrong impression.’

‘What impression?’

‘That you are a traditional, backward Indian girl, like some of these women you see at the Indian Club. Can't even speak English properly.’ (Pg. 147)

The story is divided into three parts. The first part describes the life of Nina and Ananda in India and other two parts present their struggle as immigrants in Canada. In their strife to blend in the host society, they had to experience many ups and downs in the alien society and culture.

At the outset of Ananda's arrival in Canada, he felt cultural shock as he belonged to a traditional family with a strong sense of morality. The empty roads of Canada awoke in Ananda the, first comparison of Canada with India. As he was used to the hustle-bustle of India, he asked his uncle ‘Where are all the people?’ (Pg. 18). The self-reliant system of Canada brought the second cultural shock for Ananda as he never used to do any household work at home in India, when his parents were alive because domestic help was easily available in India. He was shocked to listen about the need to do all the chores like ironing, washing, bed making etc. on his own. He was surprised and felt humiliated by his uncle and aunt Nancy's manner of acquainting him with the rule of self-dependency in Canada, thus thinking

him to be untrained. Further, when his cousin, Lenny, guided him about the way of cleaning the bathroom after a bath, and also about the way to remake the bed in the morning, he told Lenny that, 'In India we had a maid who did all this, I mainly studied.' (Pg. 21) Such instances heightened his nostalgia and the intensity of the cultural shock.

Furthermore, Ananda didn't want to participate in the hybrid celebrations of the festivals like Diwali and Holi, as he had experienced the essence of these festivals with his parents when they were alive by praying on all the special occasions like Diwali, Dussehra, Janmashtami etc. and by consuming special food on the day of fast. His slow settlement in this new society was greatly accelerated by his uncle's lived experiences and suggestions. His perceptive about his pending decision to be a non-vegetarian was strengthened by the food adaptation of his uncle which later became an essential part of his easy survival abroad.

Ananda's mingling with the Western society began with his choice to drink alcohol in the dental college. He embarked upon his journey of assimilation with many new beginnings in his life in Canada like shift to non-vegetarian diet, new degree, new job, new clinic etc. But later he felt an urge to become an essential part of the Canadian society as his friend, Gary, has familiarized him with the Western ways and values. The notion of independence, individualism and privacy were introduced to him by Gary which later changed his perspective towards the process of his assimilation. Ananda couldn't escape the open lifestyle of Canada where indulging into love-affair is a commonplace and normal thing. After his changed culinary choices, entry of Sue in his life as his first girlfriend in Canada hued him more in the colours of Canada. He urged to be a cultured man in the Canadian society and his desire for the complete acceptance by this society can be understood from his anxiousness about his wife, Nina's Indian clothes in the later part of the novel.

Later, his marriage with Nina will help the readers to explore a new dimension of the lived experiences and perspectives of the immigrants. Nina's struggle in Canada divulges the extent of challenges, loneliness, alienation, nostalgia and discomfort encountered by the immigrants who are uprooted from their native land due to the constraints of their marriage with an NRI. When Nina tried to open her suitcase on her arrival in Canada, her nostalgia pricked her emotions and didn't let her open the suitcase filled with the memories of home in the form of clothes etc. packed by her mother and herself together. The belongings of the suitcase reminded her of the warmth of her mother's love.

Though she needed her toilet things, she hesitated before opening them, for all of home lay within, and she was scared of pain. Her mother and she had packed together, trying to cram within the trousseau that had been collected over a lifetime. (Pg. 112)

Manju Kapur also picturizes in the novel the physical and mental grappling of the immigrant females like Nina for their survival and existence in the strange land. In the starting, Nina tried to overcome her loneliness by making the most of her habit of reading books and with her short tours to the nearby shopping complexes. Initially, Nina compared the commodities and luxuries of the land of plenty i.e. Canada with the land of scarcity i.e. India. The price difference of the food items like grape juice appeared shocking to her and it seemed almost free to her in comparison to its cost of sixty rupees in India.

Apart from this, her new identity in Canada as the wife of Ananda was formed at the cost of losing her career, losing her identity as a lecturer, losing her homeland and its culture and values and above all at the cost of losing her home and warm company and love of her widowed mother. She said, 'I miss home – I miss a job – I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?' (Pg. 233)

There, she stood at the borders of the Eastern and Western value systems – with her strong rootedness in one and the compulsion to adopt the other for her comfortable survival in the hostland. Ananda wanted his wife to enter the Western circle and also to become the part of this system and society for her easy survival in the foreign land. His focus on Nina's clothes and manners showed his concern about her acceptance by the Canadian society. Ananda preferred Nina to wear salwar kameez instead of traditional sari. He felt that at the barbeque at Gary's place, all would be dressed in jeans and t-shirt and Nina would look out of place being dressed in the traditional sari. However, the Westerners' viewpoint was different from what was anticipated by Ananda. Gary's family admired traditional salwar kameez of Nina, even Sue expressed a desire to wear beautiful clothes like Nina. Sue commented:

'I wish I could wear clothes like yours, graceful and feminine. But,' she gestured to her jeans and T-shirt, 'old fuddy-duddy, that's me.' (Pg. 146)

In the novel, clothes and dressing style as per the occasion are portrayed as the essential part of conformity and adaptation with the hostland's culture. Immigrant women had to be more on the verge of sacrifice as there is a major transformation in their clothes than the males. Nina took time to adopt this culture. The cold climate and unavailability of servants for washing, drying, ironing the typical Indian saris and salwar kameez were a trigger behind Nina's choice to wear Western clothes. Even, Ananda's discomfort and consciousness towards Nina's gaudy and exotic Indian dresses triggered this change in Nina's point of view.

Nina felt uprooted in the Canadian society and her long hours of loneliness and silence pierced her which tremendously affected her inner being and altered her psychological makeup as well. In order to fight her alienation and to develop some social contacts, she opted to work at a library on the part time basis, then took admission in a two-year library science course and finally liberated herself from all the marital obligations by developing an extra-marital affair with one of her classmates, Anton. This mental transformation of Nina came from the inescapable impact of the openness and exposure of the Western free society. In addition, her emotional disconnection from Ananda dragged a traditional woman connected to her roots into this mire. This introduced a new element to her simple life which used to center around her husband, Ananda earlier. Further, her failing marriage due to the discovery of Ananda's extra-marital affair with a white woman, Marty and her own rape by her boyfriend, Anton, liberated her spirit from all the obligations, thus carrying her towards the door of independence and self-discovery. At the end, Nina realized her mistake of negotiating her identity for her adaptation in the new culture of the hostland at the cost of ignoring her old identity. She felt out of place in the strange land. Finally, she emerged as a new woman thus liberating herself from all the bonds especially from her failing marriage and she marched on the path of the self-discovery and the novel ends with these lines:

When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull up your shallow

roots and move. Find a new place, new friends, a new family. It had been possible once, it would be possible again. (Pg. 330)

In the nutshell, Manju Kapur leaves the novel open-ended as she can't provide a permanent solution for the ongoing struggle of the immigrants for their existence abroad.

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