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www.the-criterion.com

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Diaspora Consciousness in Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*

Anamika Gupta

(Research Scholar)

Dept. of English &

Modern European Languages,

University of Allahabad,

Allahabad, 211002

Manju Kapur has shot into prominence with the publication of her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* in 1998 which won her Commonwealth Writers' Prize in Eurasia region. She is the author of four other novels entitled *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2009) and *Custody* (2011) of which *Home* was shortlisted for Hutch Crossword Book Award in 2006. She belongs to Amritsar; she has done her graduation from Delhi University then moved to do M.A. from Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada and returned to India to do M.Phil. from Delhi University and become a professor in Miranda House, though at present she has retired from there.

Kapur has basically written about women; their marriage, life after marriage, their quest for identity, their trauma and dilemma if failing to achieve the aspired results in their life but in *The Immigrant*, she has made a departure from the above mentioned themes, for, through this novel, we come across the Diaspora consciousness of the novelist, though she does not stand in the category of the writers of Diaspora such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, V.S. Naipaul, Vikram Seth, Bharati Mukharjee, Anita Desai, Upmanyu Chatterjee, Salman Rushdie, Githa Hariharan and so on. The writings of these writers provide an inside view of the problems and obstacles endured by the expatriates in their new adopted land.

Before proceeding in this direction, the words- Diaspora, migration or immigration and exile require a clear explanation. Etymologically, the term Diaspora has its origination in Greek, made up of 'dia' and 'speirin', meaning to scatter or to disperse. "It was" as N. Jayaram quotes Martin Baumann in his *The Indian Diaspora: Dynamics of Migration*, "originally used to refer to the aggregate of Jews or Jewish communities scattered in exile outside Palestine" (16). It proves the say that Rome was not built in a day, that is, the history of Diaspora dates back even centuries before Christ and it can be defined as people's forcible moving from their native land to new countries and regions.

As for as migration of Indian people is concerned, Indians, since time immemorial have been migrating to other countries though conditions vary in current parlance; they move with their own choice unlike earlier times. Abha Pandey in her *Indian Diasporic Literature* defines migration and differentiates it with exile in this way:

The term [migration] defines a location, physical movement and a forward looking attitude whereas those who were taken to islands as convicts were termed exiles. (26)

People leave their homeland for various results, though, down the pre-colonial to post-colonial phase, migration has taken different form, in the sense that earlier people were compulsorily taken to other countries to do the labor-work, being exploited by their masters or soldiers, were taken to participate in various wars but now they willingly leave their homeland either in search of better opportunities of job to get maximum financial gain or under severe economic compulsion at home. Though they know that life abroad is full of problems and atrocities because of economic, social and racial discrimination but the West, they has taken for granted, is a land of opportunities.

People do migrate, settle somewhere but this action causes a number of reactions; reason for migration may vary but they all share common experiences- split sensibility, quest for identity, divided self, alienation, estrangement, nostalgia, frustration, despondency, uncertainty, loss of cultural traditions, values and indigenous language; bear the trauma of being away from home and anguish of not to return to their prior land and this is what the diasporic writers do incorporate in their works. Apart from that, the fore-grounded issues of displacement, dislocation or unsettlement due to cultural-conflict and alien surroundings lead the migrant to the state of dilemma.

Thus, the present paper is an attempt to showcase the aforesaid issues in Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* though she does not bear the title of diasporic writer but this novel is a significant contribution in this direction. It deals with the three recurrent themes of diasporic writing as S.L. Sharma writes:

“The first is that overseas Indians tend to recreate Indian social structure wherever they go. The second is that they tend to hold fast their native culture in their land of adoption and the third is that their mode of adaptation is marked by a clear preference for economic integration more than cultural preservation”(47). And all these themes can be traced in this piece of fiction.

It is the story of Nina and Ananda Sharma. Nina is thirty years old who works as a lecturer in Miranda House, Delhi. Her unmarried status causes frustration because of society in the guise of mother, friends and colleagues. Her mother wants her to settle somewhere in abroad saying, “If you married an NRI or someone in the foreign services, you could live abroad nicely” (11). This is what every Indian dreams of. It is easy to build castle in the air, as people go abroad with a view to settlement but reality is very harsh to swallow. For Nina, a proposal comes from an NRI, Ananda Sharma. He is a dentist by profession who leaves India after his parents' death on the call of his uncle in Halifax with the “mindset of an Immigrant, departing with no desire to return” (18), even when he establishes himself as a reputed dentist in Dehradun during his internship. Such immigration in search of better opportunities, we can see, promotes brain-drain. Consequently, the nation gradually loses the creamy layer and dead-stock remains in hand.

By the moment, a person bids good-bye to his home and enters a new one, a sense of alienation and anonymity arise in the heart and feels himself in oblivion and in this way proves the old say that the heart is where home is not; the sense of self gets displaced, identity loses and the migrant's bewilderment pinches him to look back at prior land but in failing to do so, he becomes the victim of double consciousness, that is, the migrant person adopts only those things in abroad in which he finds himself fit and convenient and condemns and criticizes those which does not suit to his taste and from this very point, arises the issue of double identity or divided-self. The Immigration splits the personality of the migrants. On the one hand, they find their legs grounded in the foreign soil but on the other, even a trivial incident shatters this belief and make them acknowledge that they knowingly compress their national feelings to adopt the culture of the host country. The same happens with Ananda when he reaches Canada. His own self bifurcates; difficulties and discomfort encircle him in the new setup and a feeling of insult disturbs his peace of mind when at his uncle's home, he is instructed to do his own work from the very first day; to clean the toilet, to mop the bathroom floor after bath. His Indian sensibility is given a shock by all this because in his home, “All his life he has been praised for being a good boy. He had assumed responsibility, performed well in exams, done his duty by his parents, met every expectation placed on his shoulders” (20).

Neither Ananda nor his Canadian relatives is wrong in their respective place but it is the cultural difference which compels them to do so. Asha Saharan's remark is very apt in this connection:

When a person migrates from the society of his/her birth and bearing, most of those beliefs follow the migrant to the country of migration. (93)

It is very difficult to transmute immediately in the new culture. Slowly and gradually, Ananda takes it for granted that in West, everything- food habits, dressing sense, lifestyle, relationships, family; all bear a different meaning and measured with money and materialism. He too starts behaving like Canadian people and assumes himself Canadian but time to time when he finds something against his taste and interest, immediately his mind diverts towards his nation. Ananda validates this notion of double consciousness when one of his friends, Garry sets a date for him with a Canadian lady, Sue; she initiates to have a physical relationship with him but finding him less exciting, puts a question mark on his manhood. It causes bitterness, hatred and envy in his heart for western woman; crushes his dream to marry a westerner and he decides to marry an Indian girl because he is acquainted with the view that Indian women do not question the manhood of their husbands and further he could recreate the familiar surroundings in new milieu as Kapur writes:

The Immigrant man needed a bride 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. (79)

Racial discrimination is one more issue that comes as an obstacle in the process of settlement in abroad. Even today, in the era of globalization and liberalism, Westerners partially treat the people of East on the grounds of race and ethnicity. In this novel, we come across such an incident when Nina leaves India after marrying Ananda, an enquiry takes place at airport and a number of questions have been queued for her, about her belongings and whereabouts which rage her and compels her to ask herself, "Why were people so silent about the humiliations they faced in the West?"(108) On reaching Canada, her resentment pours out before Ananda remarking, "They wouldn't treat European or American like that, why me" and adds that "They did it because we are Third World" (111). It exposes that by the time, a person crosses the national boundaries to step in the new world, he or she is subjected to the oppression and discrimination as John Mcleod in his *Beginning Postcolonialism* writes:

Too often diaspora peoples have been ghettoized and excluded from feeling they belong to 'new country' and suffered their cultural practices to be mocked and discriminated against.(208)

Nina struggles with the changing surroundings, new routine, new people. She is steeped in Indian culture and exhibits the behaviour of the paradigmatic Indian wife. She couldn't reconcile to the new-fangled circumstances and finds herself divided and isolated. With every passing day, her confrontation with fresh difficulties increases her seclusion at which the novelist seems to give suggestion to the immigrants to "forget the smells, sights and sounds you were used to, forget them or you will not survive. There is new stuff around, make it your own, you have to"(123). This is what a migrant has to do and the problem arises from this very point while failing to do so because of that person's arrival with, as defined by N. Jayaram, "socio-cultural baggage" which "consisted of religion, language, music, art, dress, cuisine, etc. often in the folk form but in their regional variants"(27).

During this process of settlement in new country, some of these elements disappear, some survive or some assimilate with the new one but it all depends on diasporic situations because the experience of these elements vary from place to place and person to person. In Canada, Nina and Ananda, both feel the difficulties in adopting and adapting in the new customs but in comparison to Nina, he does not have to compromise enough like her whether it is the matter of dressing or food-habits or it is about assertion or rejection of new values. For instance, when sari-clad Nina meets his uncle and aunt and his friend Garry and Sue, she is made feel inferior even by Indian-origin his uncle and by Ananda himself who is anxious

about her dressing Sari, bindi and gold jewels whereas Canadians Sue and Garry not only welcome her warmly but also praises her beauty along with her Indian outfits. On knowing the reason of her husband's anxiety, Nina's remark exhibits a sense of rejection to Western culture:

Since we are not from here, your friends must make allowances. Besides, beyond a point, how does it matter what they think. (150)

But to what extent, could she fight to reject the Western norms while she herself has become a part of it. The living in-between condition is very painful for the immigrants so is with her and to come out of such condition, either one has to be firm determined to adhere to one's national culture or to assimilate with the culture of new land to survive. We find Nina assimilating with the Canadian trends of dressing and foot-habits. On her husband's insistence, she starts wearing jeans and t-shirts and other sorts of western clothes, though initially feels discomfort and inhibition but once she finds herself unnoticed, she feels "comfort in anonymity" (154) and "the part of the crowd, the fair, the city, the province, the country" (160).

Is it all for the immigrants to confine only to the superficial level of dress and food? What about one's native and individual identity in abroad? We can trace that in order to survive there, some cultural values are lost, some are assimilated and this very assimilation gives rise to the issue of identity loss which becomes more complex, specifically on the part of women. In this connection, it would not be out of point to quote Ranu Uniyal who writes:

Women in particular face dislocation at multiple levels. Their identity as a wife and a mother within the private sphere and as brown, non-working, tradition bound Indian in the public sphere is a constant site of struggle. (90)

Women's identity is always on the margin at multiple levels and the condition becomes worse in abroad if she has nothing to do except remaining in the four walls of the home. Before marriage she carries the title of her father- Nina Batra, after marriage, carries her husband's- Nina Sharma but after displacement, she loses the most basic identity of being an Indian along with her profession of lecturer. On the realization of this fact that she is in oblivion having no existence and identity of her own, she feels alienated to the new surroundings and nostalgia and reminiscences take place in her mind. Her inner conflict can be seen in these lines- "Everything is very strange. I used to be a teacher, infact I taught for ten years before I came here. And now I do nothing" (232). But her non-working status inspires her to find her feet in foreign soil and to remove her loneliness, she, on the suggestion of Sue, joins the La Leche League, a group which focuses on feminist issues and later goes for the two year Library Science Course so that she could be independent financially. Thus, Nina's this action substantiates the diasporic theme of 'economic integration than cultural preservation'.

Besides, in the immigration struggle, adultery and infidelity challenge the notion of family life, cultural recognition and marital fidelity. Manju kapur has engraved this issue on the canvass of this novel through Nina and Ananda. Both of them had involved in pre-marital affair but after marriage, instead of making their marriage worth and successful, neither of them misses the opportunity to get in relation with other partner. Ananda is unable to satisfy Nina biologically because of his impotency and fills the vacuum of marital life with lies. Dissatisfaction distracts their minds; they both play the game of hide and seek. On the one hand, Ananda enjoys another woman, Mandy, in her absence and on the other Nina too does the same, when she meets a guy named Anton, hailed from New York, during the course of her library studies. From the very first day of college, Anton had a bad eye on her and by making her feel special, he gets closer to her at whom Nina surrenders herself wholeheartedly and "For the first time she had sense of ownself, entirely separate from other people, autonomous, independent" (264). She feels sexually liberated, more Canadian less

Indian and in this dualism of identity, she starts believing in the dictum often quoted by her husband, “In Rome, do as Romans do” (271) which, in turn, challenges her Indian ethics and values because in company of Anton she adopts those things which she has never dreamt of. Till now, she has never touched the meat but now with him she eats red meat and flesh of cows that “her mother worshipped on fixed days of the Hindu calendar”(270). But this sense of autonomy and freedom dissolves in air on the recognition that she is being used by Anton and she decides not to get in affair again but fate gives him one more chance and he recreates Ottawa night in New York and at this time she is badly raped by him.

Apart from Nina’s extra-marital relationship, Ananda too enjoys another woman. This affair comes in limelight when she returns from India after her mother’s death. On a morning she discovers a blond hair on the pillow which reveals the whole mystery-“the distance, the silence, the ticket for two months in India, his [Ananda’s] strange indifference interspersed with tenderness, the shifty look that skittered about her” (327-8). She re-examines the whole case and decides to pack up in this game, for, immigration has given her strength not only to accept new things but also to reject and discard unwanted things. She silently gives up her marriage because the remaining superficial togetherness is snatched away by lies, infidelity, discontent and frustration. They get nothing except complexities and hurdles though Nina owes a lot to Ananda as well as to Canada to which she does not pay any gratitude and she goes further to re-inventing herself. Here Kapur’s voice seems to be merged with Nina:

When something failed it was a signal to move on. For an immigrant there was no going back. (333)

Thus, it is evident from the afore-mentioned discussion that Manju kapur has brought forth the diasporic issues in the circumference of this piece of fiction. But she does not suggest any solution to the problems faced by the immigrants rather she leaves on the reader to chisel out with it. She has not valorized the life in the new world but she simply differentiates between the life in the homeland and in abroad. It is true that individual gets in trouble after immigration but gradually with the mingling of the new culture, it also opens up new routes and new ways of thinking which assist in development and advancement and ultimately it depends upon the attitude of the person how to tackle with the obstacles that come in between from migration to settlement.

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