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Interrogating Immigrant Experiences: A Global Perspective in Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*

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In this paper I have preferred to discuss the novel *The Immigrant* written by Manju Kapur a distinguished and an internationally acclaimed writer of the post-nineties era. She was born in Amritsar in 1948. She currently lives in Delhi, India. She is the one who is absolutely progressive and very just in her feministic approach almost all in her novels like *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody*. She has secured her prominent presence for what she writes about women, their emancipation, and their role in society, most of all their individuality and sense of self actualization. She is one among other feminist writers of India who have dealt with several burning issues related to women in India almost with urban settings. She has brought in to the focus different aspects of women, who are educated, westernized and freedom conscious. Because of her willingness to write about women she is preferred to call herself a feminist writer. In an interview with Saudamini Jain published in Hindustan Times, she says:

“Well, I am very aware of feminist thinking. I have been deeply influenced by it, and I would call myself a feminist as well. I believe it is impossible to live in the world today as a thinking person, and not be one, and this applies to both men and women. I don't set out with a conscious feminist agenda, but in describing the relationships between men and women a feminist perspective is often inevitable - and this applies to books written well before the term was invented.”²

The aim of the present paper is to bring forward the current understanding of a woman's experiences in foreign land through the process of immigration. The writer Manju Kapur have discussed the term 'immigrant experiences' as experiences which are formed by financial positions, personal skills and biased associations between country of origin and of adaptation in her novel *The Immigrant*. She has depicted the immigrant experiences without herself being one. However she does not belong to the category of diasporic writer but she was the part of the migrant process during her education at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, from where she obtained her Master of Arts in English. Again in an interview with Dipa Diddi She says:

“The idea had been simmering at the back of my mind for a relatively long time. I have lived abroad and know the problems faced by immigrants, their thought patterns. It is very different from staying in your own country.”³

The process of immigration involves two terms- isolation and rehabilitation in which we have three layer operations, that is construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. For example when a man is ready to depart for a foreign land, his attitude, responses, thinking, manners, way of life, etc, have already had a shapes according to the systems of his or her native place. This is construction phase. Then, he or she immigrates to the new place which has its own way of living, systems and life style. So the immigrant has to first deconstruct his/her believes, mode of

thinking and life pattern which is already constructed and then the people starts reconstructing way of living according to the systems of the new place. This three layer operation plays an important role in construction the life of an immigrant man or woman at large. Manju Kapur brings out in to the light that when a person(s) migrates to other country it is not always due to under political compulsions or to a hostile circumstances result in forced exile but they willingly leave their native places tempted by a promise of brilliant future or as a getaway out of some economic or personal problems. Therefore, these peoples' longing to settle abroad is entirely the result of their own conscious choices. They are ready to make all sorts of compromises to execute their life style. This is what is mainly depicted in the present novel through the two leading characters of the novel.

The novel *The Immigrant* revolves around the characters Ananda an NRI husband of the protagonist Nina, who is willing to set his career in Canada and his wife Nina who has a desire to live a life on her own value amidst western culture after marriage. To analyze the experiences of a woman, process of westernization and assimilation with the foreign ethos is the sole concern of the paper which needs more detailed study in the later parts of the paper.

When a woman comes to a foreign land there are certain things which haunt her in every steps of her life. She has her own constructed lifestyle according to her native country which she has to deconstruct to follow the new one i.e. the reconstruction of the life pattern according to the west. If a woman is a house wife it is more difficult for her to assimilate herself with the western culture. Though both men and women feel uprooted, frustrated, dwells in dilemma but it is women who survive more than men. This is what is presented through the female protagonist Nina by the writer Manju Kapur in her novel *The Immigrant*. It is well mentioned by the novelist that men and women both have to face the problems while arriving to a new surroundings especially the foreign land unknown to them. In this novel Ananda a NRI dentist, Nina's husband also faces some problems with his first encounter with the culture and livings of the Canada but soon he adjusted with that surroundings and become habitual of that. But it is more necessary to mention here the troubles, and dilemma, of a woman that is Nina who tries to find some space in that alien country by learning the culture and mannerism prevailed there.

Nina, a thirty years old lady sacrifices her job of a lecturer at Miranda House after her marriage with an NRI dentist Ananda and is ready to migrate to Canada. Although Nina has seen the western lives while her father's foreign service but it was after her marriage when she came in to touch with the western code of conduct properly. In this paper it is mentioned above that to a major extent the migration is due to the betterment of the future not under some pressure or forced exile, that is what presented in the beginning of the novel when Nina's mother longs for her daughter's life full of happiness after marrying to an NRI. Her mother says to Nina: "If you married an NRI or someone in the foreign services you could live abroad nicely." (Kapur 2010, 11)

Nina's friend Jenobia, was very close to Nina during her lecturer ship at Miranda House. Almost in every decision of Nina's life there lied some sorts of suggestion from Jenobia's sides. She is of the notion that if Nina goes abroad for further study that is for her PhD degree, she may get some guy who can be beyond patriarchal thinking. Because she is of the opinion that Indian men are blind followers of their mother's instructions. On Nina's marrying to an NRI, her friend suggests her in this way. She says:

“She frequently urged Nina to go abroad for higher studies, that being her only chance of finding a decent guy, for Indian men were mother obsessed, infantile, chauvinist bastards.” (8)

This is how the novelist has portrayed the thinking of the peoples who desire for a better life in future in some foreign land because they had the fixed notion of luxuries life in a foreign country to live on. In some parts of the novel Ananda's life is also presented in this respect when he leaves India for better career in dentistry in Canada. At this time and in that era, marrying an NRI was the next best thing to a secure and stable life. To quote from the text:

“To her Ananda presented himself as an eligible, well-off professional, settled in the first world country, and honest, upright citizen...Nina- she wanted to settle down, she wanted children, she could continue in the same rut for years...this could be her last chance. What were the odds of marrying after thirty?”(72-73)

Next, the second point of my discussion i.e. the racial discrimination, the judgment of an Asian people on the basis of their color, getups and accent at large. It is widely accepted that when a person comes as an immigrant they has to face several problems regarding their real existence. Nina also suffers with the problems after her first encounter at Toronto airport. She had to go a rigorous introspection because she was from outside and of wrong color. When Nina reaches the counter, the immigration man demands to see her husband and she told him that he is in Halifax. She has to step aside and wait. She is ushered in to a small empty cubicle with neon lights, with no windows. That seems like the jail. After that a woman came and with a form and started questioning to Nina. She writes her husband about the treatment which she met there at the airport. She says:

“She is being asked for proof of marriage... Rages fill her. Why were people so silent about the humiliation 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 address as a ma'am, no respect is conveyed.”(106)

Nina was a lecturer at a university and deserves respect but here the situation is totally changed. She started thinking how she was used to respect with her class, education, accent and her way of dressing in India but here a different yardstick is used to judge her. In a state of enragement, she voices her offense 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 a 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.”(106-7)

The color of a person's skin is the major question of debate in the west. The person who comes from the non-European country having colored skin faces severe problems in the west. Nina also experienced it at the airport, “The white people queuing for entry in to the country look away, the colored ones have pity in their eyes.” (105) It seems strange to Nina the word 'dark' applied to her instead of her fair complexion which used to be the matter of proud in India.

The novel deals first and foremost with the issue of cultural inconsistency which the immigrants' peoples are subjected to. The native people have their specific cultural habits in which they have been born and brought up but the process of immigration compels them to assimilate with the contrasting culture of a foreign land. This cultural predicament often causes many disturbing setbacks to them. The cultural predicament makes them to pass through fits of homesickness resulting into gloominess and anxiety. Nina also feels homesick after coming to Canada. She was the housewife there and if a woman is not a working woman in a foreign country then it becomes more painful to pass the time there. Kapur rightly comments:

“The immigrant who comes as a wife has a more difficult time. If work exists for her, it is in the future and after much finding of feet. At present all she is, a wife, and a wife is alone for many-many hours. 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...an immigrant for life.” (121-22)

Nina cries, feels homesick, sometimes adventurous but often forlorn. To pass her time she approaches her housework like washing dish, bed making, cleaning room, stretching every task out slowly. Although her husband Ananda knows about her loneliness and thinks about making her career in teaching but in abroad teaching job is long and arduous. One has to have PhD and has to have published. All luxuries or amenities which the place provides lose their attraction. She, like other immigrants, becomes nostalgic and started longing for the native home.

“She longed to breathe the foul air, longed to sit in a scooter rickshaw and have every bone in her body jolted...Home that was what she wanted. The park, the trees, the harbor, the view, everything was so pretty, but it failed to satisfy her heart.” (176)

Nina finds herself alone in Canada because her teaching degree is not enough to get her a job in Canada. She has to live in the house alone for hours. She started brooding over the past. Nina feels tense and not ready to welcome changes which were so painstaking that she feels branchless as well as rootless in the west. She then begins to cry and feel nostalgic and dejected.

“Till Nina came to Canada she hadn't known what lonely meant. At home one was never really alone. The presence of her mother, the vendors who came to door the door, the half hour gardener who watered their plants, the part time maid who washed and cleaned, the encounters with the landlady, all these had been woven into her day.”(159)

All immigrants want a superior life but the recognition that east is east and west is west and never shall twain assemble destroy their dreams. Every human being in his first journey to a foreign country feels lost and puzzled. Living among odd people, strange surroundings and new-fangled culture keeps them on the rock. They long to inhale the air of their native place, to have vision of the parks, trees, and the harbor of their own. Similar to further immigrants, Nina also feels isolated. She has lost her home and her job. She cries:

“Everything is very strange”, she said in a rush, “I used to be a teacher, in fact I taught for ten years before I came here. And now I do nothing. I have not even been able to conceive. Am I locked into stereotypical expectations? I don't know...I miss home — I miss a job — I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?” (229-233)

Nina, coming to the Canada tries to learn the culture and way of living with the help of her husband. She finds herself unable to cope up with these new surroundings easily. Everything seems strange outside there, inappropriate to adjust. Nina started thinking to assimilate:

“To stop finding little things strange and confusing, laughable and inappropriate. Wear the shoe on the other foot, sister, brother. They think the same of you. Get rid of the schism, become enough like them to be comfortable, more and mingle...forget the smells, sights, sounds you were used to, forget them or you will not survive. There is new stuff around, make it your own, you have to.”(121)

Writer has expressed the true aspects of Nina's life first in her native land i.e. India and second of Canada. In India Nina's way of dressing were decent full of salwar kameez and saris from different parts of Indian culture. But in Canada situation was alter. Her Indian way of dressing presented her as an integral part of India identity and as an outsider in Canada. Although everybody appreciated her clothes, except her husband but the realization of an Indian feature haunts her every time. The references to clothing are frequent throughout the novel that indicates an imperative representation of identity for Nina, how it brings her closer to India and how she is perceived by others.

“She took out her saris and stroked the intricate woven surfaces. Benarasi, Kanjeevaram, Orissa patola, Gujarati patola, Gujarati patola, Bandhani; she had fancied carrying all parts of India to Canada in her clothes. She spread the brightest one on the bed, and gazed at the magic of the green, yellow and red Gujarati weave” (112)

To assimilate with the clothing style of the west she goes in a store with her husband to buy some western outfit but in that western outfit Nina finds herself so awful that she could not bear it.

“The stuff blue material pinched her waist and hurt her crotch. She tried squatting in them; the discomfort grew. Looser, I want looser. In a larger size, she could slip a hand in the waistband, but still the material felt hard and stiff against her skin...her belly bulged visibly against the material.”(151).

Ultimately Nina tries to assimilate herself with Western culture. She learns to break her solitude. She buys books from the shop to pass her time, to avoid the nostalgia. But reading books also fails to entertain her. It feels it unexciting and tiresome. She, in order to find herself out, begins to live like her husband, following the western code of conduct by wearing jeans and eating meat and other western non-vegetarian foods. Here begins the construction of new identity and the deconstruction of native appearance. Because she can't teach there for the lack of required qualification, so to get rid of her boredom she joins a library course so that she could remain busy.

In the process of assimilation and being westernization Nina entered in to extra-marital relationship with Anton her colleague during her library course. Because she is westernized and modern enough she does not pay any serious attention towards this. But soon she rationalizes herself when she says that she has done what she likes. She thinks:

“That she like, she had lived. Who can feel guilty about living? Judging from the evidence and the sexual therapy centers, every citizen in North America regarded good sex as their unalienable right. It was her right too”. (260)

By changing her clothing, her mannerisms and glorifying all things Canadian while nullifying the Indian ones Nina moved a step ahead towards the west. In Canada Nina had become so westernized as her husband Ananda who has almost forgotten the Indian festivals what is only known to him is celebrating Christmas and thanks-giving. The novelist has presented the westernized image of Nina as depicted in the novel how one morning Nina listens to a British commentator reporting the Kumbh Mela, held in Allahabad every 12 years. As Nina was well cultured, worldly minded and westernized, she never shows any consideration to such rituals.

“Words reverberated through Nina, though she was as much a stranger to the Kumbh Mela as anyone in Canada. Educated, secular and westernized, she had never had anything to do with ritual Hinduism...From so far however, the crowds, the pilgrims, the piety, the cold river, the morning mist, the sadhus all called to her. Somewhere they beat in her blood and now, in a foreign land, she was guilty of exoticising India as the tourist posters in the Taj Mahal.” (173)

Nina’s natural reaction toward the kumbh Mela shows the way people become so much changed that they do not pay any attention to their native rituals and customs once they were used to.

“Yearning for home did strange things to the mind. Even though she despised cheap nostalgia, the way she has reacted to Kumbh Mela was proof that living in a different country you become a different person.” (175)

Instead of all dilemmas and disappointment Nina, the protagonist of the novel moves on to assimilate the culture of the foreign land. The novel ends with the statement of the female protagonist Nina which shows that people do not become repentant over what went before native life but welcomes the fresh one which is intense and secure for them. Nina also moves forward to secure her life in the search of a good job in Canada somewhere in the future away from restrictions and her husband to lead the life independently.

“The things that might have made separation in India difficult for Nina were hers to command in Canada. Financial self-sufficiency, rental ease, social acceptability. She hoped independence would facilitate her thought process. She looked down the path on which there would be no husband.”(329) Again she says: “I need to be myself...away from you”

Nina’s educational achievements were excellent and she succeeded in getting responses from the University of New Brunswick almost moved on the way of self-independency. She thought if someone is reinventing oneself through deconstructing the past then anywhere could be home no matter whether alien or motherland.

“Pull up your shallow roots and move. Find a new place, new friends, and a new family. It had been possible once, it would be possible again.”(330)

Conclusion:-

Towards the end of the paper it has become clear that at last these immigrants learn how to merge and mingle willingly without any force to show themselves westernize. See how minutely and also analytically, the novelist portrays the immigrant experiences of a woman who comes as

an alien in west and somehow assimilated herself with the culture and mannerism of the western country. This was the third phase of the life of a female 'the reconstruction' of the new life style according to the life pattern of Canada an alien country for the immigrants.

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