

‘Suspicion of Belonging’: A Study of Diasporic Negotiation(s) in Manju Kapur’s *The Immigrant*

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Abstract:

Today, migration has become a common phenomenon. With the advance of modern technology and a quicker transport system, people, now-a-days, move frequently across national borders, adopt a new country, and try to adapt to the hitherto foreign customs and conventions followed by the people out there. In doing so, they trade in the bargain of belonging—what to exclude and what new to inculcate from the recently left homeland and the newly acquired hostland. The dislocation that they undergo is primarily physical, but on the psychological terrain, the immigrants cannot help remembering their roots and routes to native land. Besides, if they want to take privileges in the relocated land, they have to adhere to the history and culture of that place, and need to curb their patriotic zeal as well as nationalistic nostalgia. These tugs of war, conflicts of economic interest and the passionate pull of the once lived land make them follow and flaunt a kind of compromising consciousness that straddles on either side of the land. The same thing happens with the migrants like Dr Sharma, Nancy, Gayatri Gulati, Ananda and Nina in Manju Kapur’s *the Immigrant*. Ananda left India for Canada to have a better prospect in dentistry. Nina later joined him as his wife there. In Canada their menu for food, the choice for name and dress, and the approach and attitude to sexuality and living style see a sea change. In this process of unhoming the homeland, they jeopardize their native self to be more Canadian, more western in look and approach. Nonetheless, sometimes, they get themselves in the queue of a lost generation, and express a fervent desire to return India. They make an extended effort to home the hostland by becoming a member of Indian Club there and celebrating Diwali and Holi side by side with Christmas. As a result of that, there comes the suspicion about their psychosocial affiliation irrespective of their belonging to a nation—Are they Indian or American or both

or someone who is neither Indian nor American? This paper, therefore, will seek to investigate the conundrum of belonging from a postcolonial perspective.

Keywords: Nationality, belonging double-consciousness, assemblage, third space, multiplicity.

Pre-colonial past holds a significant position to posit an idea of ‘nation’ in terms of unanimous beliefs of a community or a group, and even after the official demise of colonialism, those persisting beliefs are strong enough to unify and homogenise a community within a geographical territory. Here, we can invoke the authority of Timothy Brennan as he says:

As for the 'nation', it is both historically determined and general. As a term, it refers both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous — the 'natio' — a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging (45).

This sense of belonging and bonding, thereafter, brought a significant turn in the postcolonial studies in the late 1990s to figure out nation as something more than a geographically contagious unit. It emphasizes more on the sociocultural and ideological practices of a nation along with the other tropes and tools of nation construction such as nationalism, national language, national culture, national history, national archives, national anthem and national flag. As a nation, therefore, it can be argued that India or Canada has certain cultures and performances that enable its people to say that they share a national identity as an Indian or a Canadian.

Although, Manju Kapur chose Canada as the background of her novel *the Immigrant*, its characters Ananda, Nina, Dr Sharma were all born and brought up in India with their orthodox Indian morals and values. Even so, when they migrate, they take pains to adapt and adjust to the fashions, cultures and systems of the alien land. They struggle to cope up, but to what extent they succeed is a debatable issue. In this context, Nivedita Maitra and Dimpley Dubey say, “The experience of expatriation gradually disconnects them from their roots, but does not dislocate them completely” (33). In fact, Manju Kapur’s immigrants stand and feel both being here and there. By quoting Gilroy with some alterations, I can say, “striving to be both European and black/ *both Indian and Canadian* (mine is in the italics) requires some specific forms of double

consciousness” (1). For, their intimate interests in and affective attachments for both the cultures of India and Canada have ushered them to what Du Bois calls a ‘double consciousness’; a situation of an ‘in-betweenness’ where they acquire a sort of hybrid identity which Homi Bhabha prefers to a fixed and stereotypical identity. They become partly Indian, and partly Canadian. As neither India nor Canada can claim them fully as their own at present, they flatter the feature of a ‘nobody’, and deny any kind of essentially one national identity either Indian or Canadian in their heterogeneous interests and follow-ups. By contrast, they can be also be associated with ‘anybody’ in the sense that they bestride different places, assimilate both Indian and Canadian sensibilities, and get acclimatized to the multiple mutations. Some characteristics are rejected, and some are added in their continuous shift from one to another. Their identity, in this journey, is multiplied, and they become an assemblage, and reaches to what Bhabha calls a ‘Third Space’ where identity formation denies any kind of cultural fixity and continues to embrace diversity and differences. For example, Ananda thinks himself as being more Canadian and less Indian or Nina as being less Canadian and more Indian or often as a perfect mix of East and West. They are split by several ‘ands’, and exemplify the postmodern individuation which Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari compares to the principal characteristic of a rhizome that “is composed not of Units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither a beginning nor end, but always a middle(milieu) from which it grows and which it overfills (21).

The story of the novel is set in the seventies. After the death of his parents in a severe road accident Ananda migrates to Canada, which he thinks is a land of opportunities. He was a reputed and well-established dentist in Dehradun. He had also patriotic feeling for his country, but what it can avail? Even the simplest task in India can bleed one dry. That’s why, he is a candidate for brain-drain. In expectation of a better future abroad, he left home where he was a Brahmin, where he never let his body get polluted by a dead fish, where he never touched cigarettes and alcohol and remained a pure vegetarian. He set for a new place, new city, new country marked by the new cultural customs and conditions. The moment he puts feet in Canada he feels strange after not seeing the hustle and bustle of usually crowded India. His maternal uncle Dr Sharma and aunty Mrs. Sharma introduce him to the Western style of living. In India, Ananda got ample opportunity to study as the other domestic works like cleaning the toilet and mopping the bathroom were done by the servants. But in Canada when he gets instructed to all these filthy household works by himself, he is astonished to hear it and his Indian psyche and

sensibility receives a great shock. Gradually, his isolation verges on immense solitude and homesickness. To put aside the nostalgic sense of loss, he decides to reject the Indian psyche, break all taboos and become a citizen of the world like his uncle in a cosmopolitan sense. During breakfast, he pretends to prefer western food over Indian food. He shows no interest to know when Diwali or Holi falls, but celebrates Christmas, Canada Day and Thanksgiving Day. He mimics Canadian in talks. This is how he starts behaving and living like a Canadian, and assumes himself a full-fledged Canadian in habits and interest. However, time to time his mind diverts to his nation when he finds something against his taste and interest. For example, on the behest of Gary, whose friendship makes him a bold Canadian, he begins dating Sue, a Canadian woman. Nevertheless, he fails to satisfy her sexually, and questions are raised on his sexual potentiality and manhood. Therefore, he turns to an Indian girl Nina who is not supposed to question his manhood. Even before marriage when he brings some gifts for Nina, Mrs Batra says that “living abroad had not changed the Indian in him” (Kapur 69). He is still having old world values and respect for people. He feels somewhat confused and irascible finding his uncle recreating Indian ethos in Canada. Dr Sharma married Nancy, a Canadian lady and brought up his children Lara and Lenny as Canadians. But he takes care to expose them to Indian traditional festivals like Diwali and Holi; clothes like sari, pyjama, and foods like dosa and dal. He even sets up an Indian Club there. Actually, he does not want to let his children forget their Indian roots and become ‘half Indians’. The crisis he suffers is well manifested in his words: “If I forget everything of mine, then who was I ?” (28).

Ananda breaks all inherited taboos of his origin in drinking alcohol and in eating fish and meat. That’s how he tries to give an impression that he does not fit in to be Indian, and gets appropriated into the Canadian psyche. However, in contradiction to his pretension, like a typical Indian, he takes patriotic pleasure to present India with its elephants, tigers and jungles, and sometimes plays the role of a bitter critic of India for its dirty politics, corruption, unemployment issues and so on. He thinks how will it be to marry a girl from home and binds the bond with Nina in order to be surrounded by familiar Indian traditions, habits and attitudes. The other reason behind such decision is interesting to note. The name Nina, he exclaims is itself so nice and sounds both Indian and Canadian. Also, she has an experience of living abroad. He prefers to be known as a Canadian and not as an Asian displaced in a distant land. After marriage, one day, he asks Nina to call her Andy because it sounds foreign, Christian and Western but not a Hindu.

Despite that, when he gets his sexual potentiality empowered after being trained in California with the help of a surrogate partner, he links himself to someone more erotic and Indian. Next, he carries secret sexual escapades to the bed of Mandy without any prior knowledge of Nina, lest Nina suspects and raises questions. Towards the end of the novel when she comes to know the truth, she is not either surprised or shocked because immigration has taught her to accept new things and reject unwanted things.

Nina, the major female figure in this novel is an English teacher at Miranda House in New Delhi. She is almost thirty and after her father's death lives with her mother. She is cultured, well-educated and financially self-reliant, yet is considered a burden from a typical Indian mindset. Her mother dreams of getting her married to an NRI so that she can live abroad nicely. At last, Ananda comes with a proposal of "a rosy life, a future laced with choices, edged with beautiful snowflakes that glittered through distance, promising at the very minimum change, novelty and excitement" (78). The marriage takes place and Nina is identified with both Indian and Canadian influences on her individuation: "Her devotion to her mother and her willingness to consider an arranged marriage proved her Indian values, while her tastes, reading, thoughts manners of speech and lack of her sexual inhibition all revealed Western influences" (85).

After three months Nina gets her visa and moves to Canada to live with her husband. Nevertheless, she faces double alienation one because of her Indian baggage, and the other because of her gender. When she reaches Toronto Airport, despite having all the paperwork she is judged from a different yardstick—as a third world resident and above all a woman. She writes a note to her husband complaining: "This is not your country; you are deceived and you have deceived me. You made it out to be a liberal haven, I come from the wrong colour, wrong place" (107). Every immigrant, Ananda thinks, in his/her trip comes close to the experiences of childhood—"a kind of void, no man's landlessness" (229). Still, as soon as she is presented with the glitter of the shops, the cleanliness of the country and sense of pride of ownership as compared to the unhygienic country of cockroaches, her happiness knows no bounds. Ananda is also assured that "he was presenting something of value, civilized, ordered, therefore beautiful" (110).

Her life in Canada begins with a sense of freedom as there is no servant, landlord or landlady, neighbour or mother to curb her freedom as it usually happened in India. Notwithstanding, soon loneliness sets in with having no one to talk to or share her feelings with. She mourns what will happen to her when books will be rendered powerless to distract her, or when the house or its conveniences would no longer compensate the gap, the home away feeling. The material gains for the time being compensates the loss. But whenever she is forlorn, her native land is rekindled in her memory. She loses herself often in the images of Kumbhamela, and very often in the memory of her mother sitting devotedly in front of Hindu god and Goddesses with an empty stomach.

Nina reads books to overcome her bored feeling. But surprisingly she selects books all written by Western writers. She becomes desperate to have a child, though she is unable to conceive. She earnestly longs for motherhood, which she thinks, fulfills womanhood. This consciousness of bearing child to experience the joys of motherhood types her as a stereotypical Indian woman. She tries to have a connection with several women group there, the most important being the La Leche League to discuss women's issues. There she comes in contact with Go-Go who is originally an Indian named Gayatri Gulati and her feeling expresses the in-betweenness of the immigrants: "as a woman, she is caught between her Indianness, her parent's expectations and her own desires, which she had to admit were confused" (292). To have financial integration Nina pursues a career in Library Science, and when she finds expressing less Indianness has some advantages in the Canadian system, she gives up her sari, salwar kameez, bindi and gold jewels for jeans and t-shirts. For her, it is not easy to fit in the Western outfit, in spite of that she somehow gets used to it. Going a step ahead in that direction to become a true Westerner, she smokes cigarette and drinks beer in a pub. Not only that, she starts eating fish and meat. Looking at these changes it may seem that she is happily enjoying her life in Canada, but actually, she misses home, misses her job, misses her doing things. She sickly remembers her home with all its drawbacks and facilities. She becomes almost nostalgic ruminating on her attachment with sari, and remembers the days when she used to go to the bus stop clad in sari. Ananda is loyal to Canada because it has given them so many things, yet Nina is, perhaps, the more an Indian who defends India on many occasions. Her prompt reaction to the availability of swings in Gujrat as well as in New York is a proof in this case. The same kind of justification she gives when she transcends transnational borders of sexuality by committing

adultery with Anton behind the back of Ananda. She feels sexually liberated, more Canadian and less Indian, and in this dualism remembers her husband's quote, "In Rome do as the Romans do" (271). She says: "Her first lover (Rahul) had taken her virginity and her hopes, her second lover (Ananda) had been her husband, her third (Anton) made her international" (260). She claims "her body is her own, that included her digestive system and her vagina" (68) and she can write any narrative that must not be necessarily attached or addressed to her national or adopted virtues. In addition to this, such kind of international individualism beyond every kind of so-called identities and rationalizations do not hold ground when she chooses the cheap way not to disclose and share her relationship with Anton or the forceful rape done on her, with either Gayatri in Canada or Zenobia in India, and simply prevaricated, lest people raise finger over her integrity as a woman. The same also happens with Ananda as I have discussed before. Such secrecy is carefully managed in India because any kind of outside wedlock affair is said to pollute and destroy the holiness of a relationship. After being raped, she breaks down mentally and she wishes if she could visit India. Nina's desire of repatriation evokes diasporic dilemma of the immigrants. In this respect, Manju 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" (121).

Discovering the yellow hair that unravels Ananda's private sex encounter with Mandy, she realizes that she could no longer anchor on her husband, and her lover who have used her body for pleasure. She decides to move on, frees herself from all temporary bonds and connections, takes a job and leaves Halifax. Perhaps this is the ultimate immigrant experience that teaches not to be fixated; that shows different ways to belong to in a third space. She heads towards fresh territories, a different set of circumstances as a floating resident of the world. When one is reinventing oneself, everywhere could be home, anywhere could be made India or Canada to a limited version. In fact, the relationship of owning and belonging between a nation and its individuals is very ambivalent in a cosmopolitan environment where a man or woman likes to be identified with multiple labels. Here, I can reiterate what Ananda once said in the novel, "What about adventure, what about experiencing differences? Nobody owns anybody, you know" (261).

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