

Female Body: Site of Culture-A Study of Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*

- Asha Saharan

Abstract: Manju Kapur in her novel *The Immigrant* depicts- What happens in the case of Immigrant female who is uprooted from her home country and finds herself in a new host country? How does she balance the tightrope of maintaining her culture of origin while at the same time seeking a sense of belonging and acceptance in the host country?

Keywords: Exile, Marriage, Cultural Solitude.

Bodies are not only gendered but also racialized, marked by class relations, and embedded in sexuality hierarchies and global asymmetries. The identity of an individual is shaped by his/her self-perceptions of the world surrounding him/her based on the religion, race, class, economic and social status of family, cultural and religious beliefs shared by the society in which the individual lives. When a person migrates from the society of his/her birth and bearing, most of these beliefs follow the migrant to the country of migration the concept which is named in the apt phrase of sociologist N. Jayaram as, "the socio-cultural baggage" (Jayaram 2004, 22), carried by an immigrant. Once in a foreign land, the migrated people "find in their culture a defense mechanism against a sense of insecurity in alien settings" (Jayaram 2004, 49), and they try to stick to their identity of home and nation. This leads to the formation of diasporic and ethnic identity of the diasporic communities. Thus the immigrant occupies a space of exile and cultural solitude which can be called a hybrid location of antagonism, perpetual tension and pregnant chaos. Here the reality of the body, a material production of one local culture, and the abstraction of the mind, a cultural sub-text of a global experience, provide the intertwining threads of the immigrant existence. The becoming self namely, the immigrant, struggle to construct and negotiate his/ her identity and to evolve into confident and independent individual after undergoing a process of adaptation and assimilation. In the works of women writers the focus on women seems to be worked upon in the light of globalization. Woman's role defines the greater sociological matrix of the society. Through the image of a woman the writers construct and deconstruct her identity vis-a-vis the family and society. In her work on the body in feminist discourse, Elizabeth Grosz argues that post-structuralist feminists such as Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, and Judith Butler conceptualize female bodies as: "crucial to understanding women's psychical and social existence, but the body is no longer understood as an ahistorical, biologically given, a

cultural object. They are concerned with the lived body, the body insofar as it is represented and used in specific ways in particular cultures" (Grosz 18). Manju Kapur locates *The Immigrant* in two very different geographic settings: the dusty metropolis of Delhi and Halifax. In the first few chapters she presents the acculturation of the female body in Indian ethos and then takes the protagonist to Canada to show the problematics faced by the body in adaptation and assimilation in an alien land. The immigrant can be read as a text with two clear cut sections. In the former section, the life of unmarried Nina as lived in India in a conventional orthodox society has been presented. The latter section describes in detail the life of married Nina, the wife of an NRI dentist husband as she lives in Canada amid Western values.

While the other female protagonists of Manju Kapur struggle against the Eastern rigid social set-up, Nina's struggle is a bit different from her predecessors. She, at home, has to stand against the patriarchal set-up of the Indian middle-class society, but she, on the other hand, has to fight against her loneliness, frustration and the western ethos in Canada. Coded structures of morality and behavior, psychological and subconscious hold of Nina's conditioning. Though Nina is a well-educated mature girl, her life is in gird of cultural norms. The novel begins with the clenching impact of patriarchy where the social and gender constructs haunts her. She wants to live an intellectual life of mind but the society in the guise of her mother, colleagues, friends and landlady reminds her that a woman is no more than a body. Nina finds her embodied self at the crossroads on her thirtieth birthday. Kapur's heroine Nina "felt sixty as she walked from the bus-stop to the single room where she lived with her mother. Had she been married thirty would have been heralded as a time of youthful maturity in the midst of doting husband and children" (1). The description of her age in terms of her womb, ovaries, uterus, unfertilized eggs aptly sums up society's view of restricting utility of woman's body only to procreative activity. The wrinkles of her skin convey the gap between woman's social expectations and reality. In such a situation female embodiment is reduced into a "diminishing prospect" in the marriage market. Marriage is viewed by Nina as an act of compulsion as patriarchal society permits no alternative to marriage and holds in pity and contempt those who attempt to thwart it. Though Nina is financially self-reliant yet like all other Indian daughters she is a burden on her mother, she is a liability, a responsibility. Hence, Nina's mother, like all Indian mothers, has a one point programme that is how to get her daughter married. She is looking forward to her daughter's marriage though she knows that after her marriage she would suffer loneliness. True, "the major topic of discussion in the last eight years had been Nina's marriage— who, when, where, how?" (3) Nina knows that "every marriage is (not) a good news" (8) for Indian men are "mother-obsessed, infantile, chauvinist bastards" (9) but as she is now thirty she has to submit to the process of getting married. Nina believes that the freedom offered by immigration will give her a new identity. She is optimistic about the opportunities of her new life, but Kapur does not valorize the New World over the Old. In fact, she

continually demonstrates the limited spaces that are offered to Indian women on both sides of the globe. Nina emigrates after marrying Ananda, and arrives in Canada steeped in Indian culture exhibiting the behavior of the paradigmatic Indian wife. Here she faces the unresolved dilemma between her desire to be a traditional Indian wife and the lure of Western feminism. Nina is disappointed at the hasty mechanical way in which their marriage is consummated but as a typical Indian wife she doesn't complain but contemplates "Togetherness was the important thing. To be critical of how it was achieved was against the spirit of marriage" (91). Women are taught not to give importance to their sexual urges and be content with other material things, she thinks, "Her husband was giving her the best of everything. Was she going to be so unreasonable as to demand penetrative orgasms as well?" (96). She rationalizes Ananda's physical inadequacies in term of immigration trauma that has taken a toll of his body: "Did he not suffer crossing over nine different time zones? Or was Canada so deeply embedded in his body that waking, sleeping, he moved to its rhythms? One day her system too would move to a different beat" (122). This rationalization, is in part rooted in Nina's acculturation within Indian ethos as socialization patterns have a hold on women even after education and migration. In order to adjust, she agrees to re-mould her bodily expectations. Marriage doesn't fill the vacuum of Nina's life. Her husband's impotency effects their sexual life but Nina as a cultural construct tries hard to be patient, deluding herself as one for whom home and husband are more important than orgasm. ManjuKapur uses Ananda-Nina marriage as a metaphor that cuts across a plethora of immigration issues. The writer comments: "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). For Ananada, marrying Nina, a native, becomes both a mask and a survival strategy in an 'international' space. While at one level the marriage provides him security- grounded as it is within the patriarchal ethos of the east – "certainly he could count on a willing, patient, forgiving, loving partner" (47). On the other hand, this marriage will give him a chance to use his wife's body to regain his "sexual prowess," and remedy his frustrated immigrant masculinity. Kate Millet says in her sexual politics: "In the male dominated society woman must always be prepared to allow their husbands to use their bodies for whatever purpose they desire" (Millet: 23). This reduces her immigrant gendered body in to a consumeristic adjunct to Ananda's "truly international" immigration forays.

Apart from the marriage issues, the novel deals primarily with the issue of cultural disparity which the immigrant Nina is subjected to. She has been born and brought up in India with specific cultural habits but the immigration compels her to adopt the contrasting culture of the foreign country. Back at home, she had led a sheltered life where she was inundated with culture, tradition and values inculcated with education. Thus when Nina reaches Canada she feels the tug between tradition and freedom as she tries to meet expectations that are often wildly

contradictory. This cultural dilemma causes many emotional setbacks to her. The cultural crisis makes her to pass through fits of nostalgia resulting into dejection and stress. Though, Nina has migrated to Canada for a better life yet the realization that east is east and west is west and never shall twain meet shatter her dreams. She feels lost and confused. Living among strange people, unknown surroundings and new culture keeps her on the rock. All luxuries or facilities which the place provides lose their charm and she feels that she is an immigrant. She, like other immigrants, becomes nostalgic and longs for home. Nina feels stressed and not ready to welcome changes which are so thorough that she feels 'rootless', 'branchless'. She then begins to cry and feel homesick and forlorn. In the immigrant this feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither, rather than to both, of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the cultural displacement within which one lives is referred to by Homi Bhabha and others as unhomeliness. "To be unhomed is not the same as being homeless. To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak" (Tyson: 132). It is this sense of loss or alienation caused by displacement or dislocation which creates a position of 'live in between' or 'living on the border' which Bhabha discusses in his 'The Location of Culture'. Like other immigrants, Nina also feels isolated. She has lost her home and her job. Nina in Halifax also passes through the same dilemma as "at present all she is, is a wife, and a wife is alone for many many hours" (124). She cries, "I miss home — I miss a job — I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?" (237).

Edward Said writes, "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is unheable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (Said: 173). Nina's feeling of loss takes her to a group of women who work on feminist principles. Her distress resulting from her being without job in a foreign country and also her failure in conceiving make her to wail before Beth. "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" (232). Just because she could not get pregnant, she feels quite helpless. For her present mental state, her long cherished and deeply ingrained notions of Indian motherhood are at work as Gayatri speaks out, "We are conditioned to think a woman's fulfillment lies in birth and motherhood. Just as we are conditioned to feel failures if we don't marry" (233). The novelist comments on the stigma of infertility in Indian culture and the plight of female body, "Though medically speaking, infertility was not specifically a woman's problem; it was she who bore the brunt of this particular deficiency. Her feminine self in question, she could end up hating her body. Its female functions, the period, the blood, the cramps, the inconvenience, the dry breast useless

and without purpose, were all reminders of the child that was not to be”(165).

The female immigrant finds that her ingrained value system is being challenged. Subsequently a conflict in values emerge as she tries to hold onto the values system that she has inherited from her country while simultaneously attempting to find a niche and acceptance in the host country. She grapples with the choice between isolation and assimilation. She tries to embrace Western culture taking advantage of the opportunities it affords and attempts to assimilate as best as she can to the new society. Yet how much ever she ventures to blend in with the cosmopolitan population of Canada she is constantly aware of being different. Mahnaz Afkhami in 'Women in Exile' makes the point that: “Along with the loss of their culture and home comes the loss of the traditional patriarchal structures that limited their lives in their own land. Exile in its disruptiveness resembles a rebirth for the woman. The pain of breaking out of a cultural cocoon brings with it the possibility of an expanded universe and a freer, more independent self” (Afkhami: 45).

Nina's body becomes the site which is marred by conflict that take form and finds expression in differing value systems related to immoral behavior (codes of dressing and conduct, respect, discipline etc.), identity formation, language and a sense of belonging. One way of articulating culture is through dress codes. Dress is a more visible, tangible and outward expression of one's culture. Nina prides herself on her sense of dress as it is a symbol and signifier of a proud heritage and so carries all part of India to Canada in her clothes but soon realizes that looking after Indian clothes is exhausting and changes to western clothes. But the body accustomed to Indian clothes takes time to fit in, “The stiff blue material pinched her waist and hurt her crotch. She tried squatting in them, the discomfort grew” (153). She joins a gym and devotes time to her body. Her attitude to Western clothes changes and she feels confident in western clothes. Nina defies and defiles patriarchal and cultural expectations of Indian womanhood, of female subjectivity and sexuality. She renegotiates Indian women's subjectivity by refuting the patriarchal construct of the “ideal woman” and dares to defy male authority by enjoying free sex with Anton. Kapur deftly exposes the trope of adultery as contrived by immigration dislocation. As a part of the immigration struggle, the exposition of intimate relationship outside marriage stands out to be an important impact of it. Infidelity becomes a part of the 'diasporic-space' that tries to venture the outcome of the unhomeliness of immigration experience. This breaks the notion of family life, cultural identity and marital fidelity. Till now, not eating meat was a way of remaining true to her upbringing and a part of her belief. But after having sex with Anton, this moral belief seems hypocritical and she frees her body of all taboos and starts eating red meat, and even flesh of cows that “her mother worshipped on fixed days of the Hindu calendar” (270). She now believes, “In Rome, do as Romans do” (271). So, Nina challenges her imbibed social, cultural and moral values; ignore her social, cultural and linguistic capital by adopting an assimilatory approach and contained elements that work towards the erosion of her

cultural and social mores. Initially she tries to seek solace by clinging on to the past through memories and phone calls to her mother and Zenobia and by bonding with them, who serve as links to her past. Her mother as a culture bearer still transmits important cultural values that Nina has begun to forget.

The text traces how Nina re-embarks to her left homeland as an effort to establish links to her past and as an aid to boost her emotional and psychological support systems. The protagonist travels to India and in the process develop a value system that reflects the duality of her identity. She finds that she is comprised of multiple selves accepting or rejecting certain aspects of both Indian and Western culture. When she was in Canada she had nostalgic feelings about India but when she is back in India she feels like a stranger. She comes to terms with the idea that she never will have a single identity but rather be dispersed between being Indian and Western. She does not fight with her multiplicity but rather accepts it as part of her progressive capacity. Nina's experience as a diasporic subject, one who relocates and finds a new social/cultural space, is highly problematic. Nina's mother's death acts as her catharsis. Finally Nina is shaken out of her complacency and her emotional paralysis is shattered. In the end, in order to survive, the protagonist in Kapur's novel develop multiple consciousness, resulting in a self that is neither unified nor hybrid, but rather fragmented. As the protagonist now perceive both her race and sexuality through new and different lenses, she comes to realize that the notion of a singular identity is a fallacy and the reality of the immigrant experience is the indeterminacy of multiplicity. Finally she become capable of living in a world where individual exist not as a unified One, but as Many, bound by no borders and infinite in the possibility of inventing identities. Thus, Kapur in her gynocentric text with diasporic issues shows how migration erases and re-inscribes patterns of being and belonging. Kapur subverts the traditional immigrant discourse of alienation and loss by liberating her female protagonist from established norms and allowing her the space to review the social fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears and challenges that made up her traditional roles, thereby interrogating the very roles themselves.

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