

## Marriage, Migration, and the Making of Selfhood in Manju

### Kapur's *The Immigrant*

K. Renuka Devi

Ph.D. Research Scholar (Part-Time)

Alagappa University

Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, India

jahathran3121@gmail.com

Dr. B. Kavitha

Assistant Professor of English

Seetha Lakshmi Achi College for Women

Pallathur, Tamil Nadu, India

#### Abstract

The question of self-identity occupies a central position in diasporic literature, where characters negotiate belonging, alienation, and cultural adaptation. *The Immigrant* (2008) explores these concerns through the journey of Nina, an English lecturer from Delhi who migrates to Canada after marriage. The novel foregrounds her struggle with cultural dislocation, marital expectations, and gendered roles, thereby reflecting the ambivalence of diasporic existence. This paper examines how Nina negotiates her identity amid the conflicting demands of tradition and modernity and argues that selfhood in the novel emerges as a fluid and dynamic process shaped by migration, sexuality, gender politics, and personal agency. Through theoretical engagement with diaspora studies and postcolonial identity theory, this study highlights how Kapur redefines female subjectivity within transnational spaces.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Self-Identity, Immigration, Gender, Cultural Conflict

## Introduction

Migration has become one of the most defining experiences of the modern world, deeply influencing contemporary postcolonial and diasporic literature. It entails not only geographical relocation but also psychological fragmentation and cultural renegotiation. Diasporic subjects often inhabit liminal spaces where identity is continuously reconstituted. In *The Immigrant*, Manju Kapur narrates the story of Nina, who marries Ananda, a dentist settled in Canada, and subsequently confronts emotional, cultural, and existential challenges. The novel situates Nina's personal journey within the broader discourse of Indian middle-class aspirations, arranged marriage, and global mobility. Unlike traditional migration narratives centered on economic survival, Nina's migration is mediated through marriage, thus intertwining diaspora with gender politics. This paper explores the negotiation of self-identity in the novel by examining the intersections of marriage, cultural displacement, sexuality, and professional autonomy. It argues that Nina's identity evolves through conflict and negotiation rather than assimilation or rejection.

## Theoretical Framework: Diaspora and the "Third Space"

Diasporic identity is marked by hybridity, ambivalence, and multiplicity. Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* introduces the concept of the "third space," a liminal cultural zone where hybrid identities are formed. This framework helps interpret Nina's position between Indian traditions and Canadian modernity. Similarly, Vijay Mishra in *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* describes diasporic consciousness as shaped by memory, displacement, and the desire for belonging. Nina embodies this duality—nostalgic for home yet striving for adaptation. Postcolonial feminist criticism further illuminates Nina's experience. Pramod K. Nayar in *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* argues that identity in postcolonial texts is unstable and mediated by power structures. Nina's gendered position within marriage and diaspora reflects this instability.

### **Marriage and the Crisis of Selfhood**

Marriage functions as the central narrative catalyst in the novel. For Nina, marriage initially appears as social validation and security, especially within the Indian middle-class framework where unmarried women past a certain age face social stigma. Her union with Ananda represents not romantic fulfillment but pragmatic compromise. However, migration transforms marriage into a site of alienation. Ananda expects swift cultural assimilation and emotional adjustment. His liberal façade conceals patriarchal expectations: he desires a wife who adapts seamlessly without questioning his authority. Nina's inability to conform entirely results in emotional estrangement. Kapur critiques the myth of marriage as female completion. Instead, marriage becomes a destabilizing institution that fractures Nina's sense of self. The diasporic context amplifies this crisis, as Nina lacks familial support and familiar social structures. Thus, marital conflict becomes intertwined with cultural displacement.

### **Cultural Dislocation and Fragmented Identity**

Canada symbolizes opportunity yet produces isolation. Nina's academic qualifications initially hold little value in the new environment, reinforcing her sense of inadequacy. The absence of extended family, linguistic familiarity, and social recognition intensifies her alienation. The immigrant condition positions Nina in Bhabha's "third space," where she is neither fully Indian nor fully Canadian. She attempts to maintain cultural practices while adapting to Western norms. This hybrid existence creates internal fragmentation. Food, clothing, and social etiquette become markers of negotiation. Nina's discomfort at social gatherings and her struggle with loneliness reflect the psychological burden of migration. Her identity becomes performative—shifting according to context yet never wholly stable.

### **Sexuality and Gendered Conflict**

One of the most daring aspects of *The Immigrant* is its exploration of female sexuality. Ananda introduces Nina to sexual expectations influenced by Western norms and media.

Nina's reactions—ranging from embarrassment to curiosity—reveal the tension between traditional notions of modesty and emerging sexual agency. The female body becomes a contested terrain. Cultural morality and individual desire intersect, exposing the contradictions within diasporic modernity. While Canada offers relative sexual openness, Nina's internalized cultural codes generate guilt and confusion. Kapur does not portray sexuality merely as oppression; rather, it becomes a medium of self-discovery. Nina gradually begins to differentiate between imposed expectations and personal desire. This shift signals the emergence of agency and autonomy.

### **Professional Space and the Rebuilding of Identity**

Teaching becomes a transformative force in Nina's life. Her professional engagement restores intellectual confidence and financial independence. The classroom provides a space where she is recognized for her competence rather than her marital role. Employment enables Nina to move beyond dependence on Ananda. Professional identity reshapes her sense of worth, facilitating emotional resilience. Migration, though initially destabilizing, ultimately creates opportunities for reinvention. Through Nina's gradual assertion of independence, Kapur emphasizes that selfhood is not static but continuously reconstructed. Autonomy emerges not through rebellion alone but through self-awareness and economic agency.

### **Individual Agency and Transnational Modernity**

Kapur situates Nina's transformation within the broader context of global modernity. The novel challenges simplistic binaries of East versus West. Neither Indian tradition nor Western liberalism provides absolute liberation. Instead, Nina crafts her identity through selective negotiation. Her eventual emotional detachment from Ananda and pursuit of self-defined aspirations reflect a new diasporic female subjectivity. Identity becomes an evolving process shaped by personal choice rather than inherited norms.

## Conclusion

*The Immigrant* offers a nuanced portrayal of diasporic selfhood shaped by migration, marriage, gender, and sexuality. Nina's journey illustrates that identity is fluid, negotiated, and contingent upon context. While migration produces displacement and fragmentation, it also opens pathways to self-realization. Kapur's narrative redefines female subjectivity within transnational spaces, suggesting that liberation arises not from cultural assimilation but from critical self-awareness and agency. Nina's story ultimately underscores the paradox of diaspora: it destabilizes identity even as it enables its reconstruction.

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