Reinventing Oneself: The Immigrant Dilemma in Manju Kapur's 'The Immigrant'.

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Abstract: Transmigrants moving across different cultures and locations are uncertain of the place called home. This centrifugal homeland disorients them and they are caught physically and psychologically between two worlds. To come out of the harrowing experience of living ‘in-between’ and the associated bewilderments and confusion there is only one solution---To re-invent oneself. The paper attempts to trace the dilemma of the migrant Indian woman to Canada in Manju Kapur's novel The Immigrant.

Key Words - Immigrant, identity, reinvent, foreign land, native country.

The present day multicultural societies are a result of extensive Diaspora that has taken place over the last 200 years and now more so with the advent of globalization. Immigration of the Indians to US, England, Canada and Australia in the 20th century was mainly a personal choice either for academic pursuit or for economic gain but their acceptance in the alien lands has not come without contestations. The inhabitants of these countries have always reacted differently toward these immigrants, isolating them and resisting their assimilation into the mainstream. The immigrants have always faced a close contesting culture which has always been followed by their attempts to adjust or engross, either to be known by a separate identity as a racial group or be assimilated. G.S. Sharat Chandra expresses this sense of alienation beautifully thus:

I leaped from one life to another, and in between lay nothing but vacuum. . . . we remain at large distant and clothed by our separate worlds. We know that the bonds we shared while growing up do not unite us anymore. . . . In these new worlds, immigrants readjust and reinvent themselves, struggling to find their place in an alien landscape, netting some gains but also incurring deep emotional losses. . . . (7).

The experience of expatriation gradually disconnects the immigrants from their roots but does not dislocate completely. The perpetual shift between two states of dislocation and relocation problematizes the sustainability of an individual in such a situation.

Manju Kapur in her fourth novel The Immigrant (2008) vividly presents India in the vexed context of globalization with far greater emphasis than in any of her earlier novels. The central figure Nina is an English teacher at Miranda House, New Delhi. She lives in a one room apartment with her widowed mother. Nina is financially self-reliant yet the typical
Indian mind-set of considering a daughter a burden, a liability, a responsibility of the mother makes Nina’s life burdensome. She lost her father early in life and now her mother was her only anchorage. She wanted to see her mother happy so though grudgingly sometimes she complied to all her wishes even making a trip to the astrologer regarding her marriage. At a mature age of thirty she has less hope of finding a husband yet nurtures a faint hope of a better tomorrow. When a marriage proposal comes for Nina from an NRI, a dentist by profession settled in Canada, Nina’s mother’s happiness knew no bounds and she prayed for the proposal to materialize. After a brief courtship (mainly through exchange of letters) and after much doubt as to why an Indian with a Canadian citizenship and having lived seven years in Canada was “looking to India for a wife”(57), and after much deliberation Nina finally succumbed to the rosy picture Ananda presented to her of her life abroad. “Then Ananda promised her such a future, laced with choices, edged with beautiful snowflakes that glittered through the distance, promising at the very minimum change, novelty, excitement”(78). She agreed to jump the fence “to join legions of women who crossed the seas to marry men living in unseen lands (78). In the nineteenth century it was the Northerners to leave their homelands for Asia, Australia and Canada. “In the twentieth century it was the Asia women’s turn. 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’ (78). The marriage took place with a lot of show of material wealth of Ananda. His Canadian friend Gary and his wife, Sue came to attend the marriage, so did his maternal uncle with his Canadian wife and children. Ananda put them all up in Five Star hotels and after the marriage ceremony the couple too moved to Oberoi Hotel for their honeymoon. Nina worries about the expenses, “She knew NRIs did stay in such hotels, but anxiety about money had been her companion since infancy, and it asserted itself on every possible occasion. Ananda on the other hand was flush with dollar confidence. His ability to spend in India (unmatched by any such extravagance in Canada) had to be savoured fully (89).

After two days Ananda left for Canada leaving his newly-wed wife behind to join him later after getting her visa. After three months she got her visa and proceeded to cross the ocean. The first bitter experience of being an immigrant comes her way when she reaches Toronto and at the immigration clearance counter she is asked to step aside. She waits. The white people queuing for entry into the country look away, the colored ones have pity in their
eyes" (105). The immigration woman examines each page of her passport suspiciously. Nina’s claim that she has married a citizen needs to be scrutinized despite the paperwork. The color of her skin shouts volumes in that small room. She feels edgy; she is alone with a woman who makes no eye contact, for whom she is less than human. Suppose they found a way to kill her? That would be one less unwanted immigrant (106). The immigration woman officer asks her all sorts of irrelevant questions that make her feel edgy. "Rage fills her, why are people so silent about the humiliations 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 addressed as ma’am, no respect is conveyed" (106). Nina had been used to respect. It came with her class, her education, her accent, her clothes. ‘Here a different yardstick is used to judge her’ (106).

This is the first deception one experiences in a foreign land. The country which is projected as a ‘liberal haven’ is after all racist where a person is judged by the color of his/her skin. She feels humiliated, soiled, accused of trying to take something not rightfully hers. She does not like her introduction to the new world (107), but her humiliation is drowned in the glitter of the shops, the cleanliness of the country and sense of pride of ownership that gleamed in Ananda’s eyes. “See, how clean, how spacious,’ he said performing the introduction, “Even the air sparkles. Ah!” He closed his eyes in rapture (110). Then Halifax spread before them, gleaming in the sun, small and sweet. “Like it?” asked Ananda, turning to her and laughing. He knew he was presenting something of value, civilized, ordered and therefore beautiful (110). Her ‘new home’ was a tiny apartment, consisting of a tiny corridor with a little kitchen at its end, two rooms and a bathroom.

Life, in complete contrast to Indian ways, began with a sense of freedom, freedom from the probing eyes of the family members, neighbors, domestic helps “No servant, landlord, landlady, neighbor or mother was there to see. After years of night and day protection against the eyes of the world, it felt strange to abandon the shield that had defended her modesty” (113). Initially the solitude is pleasing but soon it turns to loneliness with no one to talk to, no one to share with the common everyday pleasures. It is difficult more for a wife when after some days ‘books are powerless to distract, when house and its conveniences can no longer completely charm or compensate. Then she realizes she is an immigrant for life’ (122). Nina passes through similar experience. Homesickness sets in, and she feels forlorn. To
fill the loneliness she yearns for a child but is unable to conceive. No amount of persuasion can make her husband to accompany her to a doctor’s clinic. Finally she decides to get herself examined and finds everything to be normal on her part. Loneliness drives her to her books which she usually borrows from a library. Here she gets a part time job and gets acquainted with a group of women who vow to become confidante and co-counselors to establish a feeling of sisterhood. Fearing exposure of his physical inadequacies Ananda secretly makes a visit to California and after two weeks training returns with newly learned techniques of overcoming his inadequacies. Nina feels hurt and annoyed at Ananda for keeping not only his visit but the purpose too, a secret from her. The idea of using a surrogate partner appalls her but Ananda feels elated. His training in California had brought into his life a new wave of happiness. All these years he had shied away from the sexually assertive white women knowing his miserable failures in gratifying their sexual pleasures and pocketing their rejection of him, leading to his agreeing to marry their less aggressive Indian counterpart, but now he felt ‘there was a sexual world waiting to be conquered’ (201). 'From the time he had come to Canada he had felt strangely attracted to the White women who were totally free of any inhibition regarding their body. He admired the ease with which they remained so unself-conscious of their bodies even when they were so much uncovered (38). ‘Sex is no great issue in the West, Here it’s no big deal, but in your culture it must be different,’ Sue said to him one day when she was with him for a date. Sex did not mean commitment (36), and ‘nobody owned anybody’ (39). This opened endless possibilities yet Ananda had remained bereft of girlfriends all these years. Now he wanted to test himself in a wider arena, but he had to make sure his wife never got to know (201). The obsession of Nina to become a mother changed to her longing for self-dependence. Co-counseling helped her to understand her situation and take a decision. She decided to take a library degree. A few months later she got admission and a fee waiver. This was her first step to autonomy. The group of women she got associated with slowly disintegrated with some of the other members too joining different jobs at different places. 'For the next two years Nina felt the comfort of being part of a student body, no longer the outsider, one of many bound together by a huge, squat, grey institutional building…' (244). "It was now she, who left for the university before Ananda and came home late. She often searched for lines of complain on Ananda’s face but found none. She remained oblivious of the sexual experimentations which Ananda was carrying on secretly with his
secretary. Library School brought great excitement into Nina’s life. She found everybody nice and friendly but Anton became her special friend. Here in Canada, men and women often connected on Platonic level, and it was such an immigrant-like thing to be disturbed by some man who paid her attention "(249)."A trip to national Archives, National Library necessitated Nina to take the trip to Ottawa. The four day trip was a pleasurable, but exhausting exercise. On the last day they got together to celebrate in a pub. Joining in the fun Nina too held a cigarette between her fingers and had drinks. She felt daring. It was easy here, drinking, smoking, asserting something, probably her sexuality" (258).

Assured of being wise in being adventurous and experiencing the difference, Nina let go of herself allowing Anton to ‘take her arms and put it round his waist, doing the same with his own, fitting her against the contours of his body. They looked like the zillions of couples she had seen walking around the university campus. Through months of Library Science, she had gazed covertly at those couples, and now, in appearance at least she was one of them (258).

Anton though married had no inhibitions of committing adultery and believed in the maxim “Nobody owns anybody” (258). Nina felt life pulsating and felt as she had lived. ‘Who can feel guilty about living? Judging from the evidence and sexual therapy centers, every citizen in North America regarded good sex as their inalienable right. It was her right too’ (260).

For the first time she had a sense of her own self, entirely separate from other people, autonomous, independent. So strange that the sex did not make her feel guilty, not beyond the initial shock (260).

She breaks another taboo when she returns home, by eating flesh. When she first came to Halifax, not eating meat had been a way of remaining true to her upbringing. “In Halifax her vegetarianism was treated respectfully, as part of her beliefs, but she felt false every time she concurred with a picture of herself as a traditional, devout Hindu. Really, what did she care about a religion she never practiced? After she had had sex with Anton, it seemed especially hypocritical to hang on to vegetables” (266). “So it was down with all taboos. She agreed to Ananda’s offer to taste trout which he was preparing. His assurance that she won’t regret this decision of hers and life would become easier for her from now on echoed in her ears. Though she knew it was not for convenience that she had decided to switch over but due
to a sense of fragmentation and distress. That weekend Nina tasted everything one by one. Red Meat. Flesh. Mammals. Cow” (267). “And Ananda looked over with relief promising himself that he would have her eating Sirloin steak and loving it” (267). Ananda had become non-vegetarian as a step to be Canadian, keeping the saying ‘when in Rome do as the Roman’s do” as his guiding principle. He wanted to leave India behind completely thinking that it would bring integrity to his life. Taking alcohol was the first step at the breaking of the taboos normally imposed on Indians by their parents. Meat eating was next. And each break was substantiated with reasonable arguments; ‘How long could one hang on to caste taboos, for whom and for what?’ (32). How much his caste mean to him? How did one’s identity depend on what he ate? (35). He was of the opinion that when one came to a new country, one had to come wholeheartedly, otherwise one could be miserable. So he had changed everything Indian about him as much as he could do. Name, habits, dress, food etc. and with each such successive move he felt liberated. Nina too experienced such liberation when she broke the rigidity of caste/religion taboo.

"That Monday Nina walked to the library, fish and beef indelibly part of her being. Feeling less Indian had its advantages. There were more possibilities in the world she could be open to. Her body was her own-and that included her digestive system and her vagina" (268).

Nina and Ananda carried on with their relationships with Anton and Mandy respectively without the knowledge of one’s deception of the other and each felt liberated because such relationships were not relationship but ‘purely meeting of the bodies; a healthy give and take’ (269). So there was no reason to feel guilty. Nina convinced herself that, “I am not taking anything away from my husband, I am not,” she rationalized, as it became clear that her trysts with Anton were not going to stop. All around her she heard of open marriages, of no living according to the rules of others. Her life was her own; she didn’t own anybody any explanations. If Anton gave her pleasure, if his easy acceptance of her gilded her studies didn’t she owe it to herself to sleep with him? (270).

But this same rationalization failed when she were to face Gayatri, her (266). She could not have brought herself to hold Gayatri’s hands, look into her eyes and lie, even by omission. Honesty was the first principle of that group. Even though she herself had heard many stories of affairs, joyous flings and sorrowful betrayals, but now when it was her turn to reveal one such story, she chose the easy way out and prevaricated (271).
group. Similarly, she avoided meeting her dearest friend Zenobia when she visited India after a gap of two years. ‘Aren’t you going to meet your friend?’ asked mother once they returned to Delhi. ‘Of course’, but Nina did nothing. When she lay down at night, she thought of Zenobia pressed on her like an unfulfilled obligation. Her experiences in Canada made her feel flawed, as though she lacked integrity (287).

Manju Kapur’s penetrating observation of the various dilemmas of the Indian immigrants is praiseworthy. She remarks:

- 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.
- In the new country they work lengthy hours to gain entrance into the system, into society, into establishing a healthy bank account. …
- As far as citizenship is concerned, a divided heart means that the immigrant clings to his status.
- Feeling that to give up his passport is the final break in the weakened chain that binds him to his motherland.
- That day does come however. … Infact the years it takes to qualify for citizenship are needed to adapt, bit by bit, day by day. 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, merge 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)

Nina did the same, bit by bit she adapted the strange ways of the West. All those persons or situations which had been her anchors remained so no longer. She realized one had to be one’s own anchor.
Anchors. You had to be your own anchor. By now
There was no escaping this knowledge. Still she
Had been trained to look for them and despite all
That happened, she had not got over the habit.
Marry me, love me, above all, look after me.
Somebody had to be responsible for her, besides
Herself. That was what women had been led to
Expect and hardly any price was too high.
Loneliness, heartache, denial, all grist to the mill. (325)

With the discovery of the ‘yellow hair’ Nina realized that she could no longer consider
Ananda as her anchor, nor Anton, her lover, who had forced himself upon her, using her for his own pleasures. She deliberately pulled off all bonds that could have held her, freed herself and moved on. She took a job and left Halifax, her husband and all memories behind.
She thought of all those who had been nice to her,
Wayfarers on the path, nothing permanent,
But interacting with them had made them
Stretch easier. Colleagues at HRI, the women’s
Group that encouraged her to be angry and assertive. Beth, Gayatri, Library school; the
Sense of community was there, warming but Temporary - everything temporary. (330)

She realized that this “was the ultimate immigrant experience not that anything was steady enough to attach yourself to for the rest of your life, but that you found different ways to belong, was not necessarily lasting, but ones that made your journey less lonely for a while. . . For as immigrant there was no going back … She too was heading towards fresh territories a different set of circumstances, a floating resident of the western world. When one is reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home” (330).

Immigration definitely, calls for willingness of the mind to assimilate, adapt himself/herself to the foreign ethos without abandoning their old selves. For Ananda and Nina their displacement was not only geographical and cultural but spiritual too that ultimately made them lose their own selves. The novel can be read as an exploration of the initial phase
of constitution of the globalised, hybrid identity today being assumed by increasing number of educated Indians. The psyche of an immigrant constantly interacts with the traditional culture of the natural home and the culture in an adopted alien land and brings about a change in the inherited tradition and culture of the immigrant. Cultural disparity which the immigrants are subjected to is dealt with primarily in this novel. Immigration compels them to adopt the contrasting culture of a foreign country breaking down the native boundaries. Migration no more leads to separation but may be seen as rebirth, reinvention in a new place, city, country marked by a new culture. The baggage of the past never sheds but carries with him and he starts to interpret and recognize the contemporary alien experience.
Reference


