



The Dichotomy Of Marriage: Incarceration And Emancipation In Manju Kapur's The Immigrant

Prikshit Singh¹, Dr. Naresh Rathee^{2*}

¹Research Scholar Department Of English And Foreign Languages Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak

^{2*}Associate Professor Chhotu Ram Arya College, Sonipat

*Corresponding Author: Dr. Naresh Rathee

*Associate Professor Chhotu Ram Arya College, Sonipat

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ABSTRACT

Marriage, an institution that has been revered and celebrated across cultures and civilizations throughout the ages, represents a sacred bond between two souls, uniting them in love, commitment, and trust. This union is not only critical for society but is also the foundation of the family unit. From the early days of human civilization, marriage has been portrayed in literature and has played a significant role in organizing societies. However, the institution of marriage has evolved over time, reflecting changing attitudes towards relationships and societal expectations. As sociologist Anthony Giddens argues in *The Transformation of Intimacy*, traditional marriage served as a central organization for social life, providing a stable foundation for the rearing of children and the maintenance of social order. This is evident in cultural traditions such as the Indian practice of arranged marriages, which emphasizes stability and continuity over romantic love as a means of ensuring the continuation of family lineage and cultural heritage. The legal and financial bonds formed through marriage can also provide a sense of security and stability, particularly in times of economic or personal uncertainty. Much like the natural world, marriage is subject to the forces of gravity that pull us towards the ground, towards the inevitable difficulties and challenges that arise in any long-term relationship. In marriage, varying expectations between partners can lead to significant challenges as they may have different views on their roles, responsibilities, and the relationship's future. Such disparities often stem from individual backgrounds, values, and experiences. Through her renowned work, *The Immigrant*, Manju Kapur masterfully captures the imperfections and challenges that arise within familial relationships over time, under various circumstances. In particular, Kapur's depiction of Nina and her husband's strained relationship, as well as the events that led to Nina's lonely existence in a foreign land, sheds light on the impact of migration on personal and family life. Nina's bond with her mother was also affected by her marriage, and the growing animosity among her marriage pushed her towards extramarital affairs, mirroring her husband's infidelity parallelly. Nina's personal life is thrown into disarray, as she struggles to navigate the complexities of human relationships and cope with the fallout from her actions. This research paper will delve into the intricacies of these issues and explore the importance of strong family ties and Nina's journey towards healing and recovery. On one hand, how the of marriage-imposed restrictions, curtailing the personal freedom of Nina to all the way towards a profound sense of freedom.

Keywords: Marriage, Extra-marital, Immigration, Family, Separation, Humanity, Family, Uprooted, Homelessness, etc.

Introduction

The Immigrant, a notable literary work penned by Manju Kapur in 2008, bears testament to the author's own experience as a migrant while pursuing her Master of Arts in English at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Through her astute portrayal of female characters, Kapur delves into the complexities of their

inner workings as they grapple with the weighty burden of patriarchal pressure in their quest to unearth their true identities. In a compelling and poignant narrative, each of Kapur's female protagonists undergoes a challenging journey of reconciling the seemingly incongruous desires of their hearts and minds, all in pursuit of personal liberation and self-discovery. In an interview given to Deepa Diddi she claims, Yes. I am a feminist writer in the sense that my works are women-centric. My novels focus on the needs and desires of women from different backgrounds and in different situations. Women yearn for recognition for their work, particularly since domestic labour so often goes unappreciated. They want concern and a sharing of responsibilities. (159)

At the heart of *The Immigrant*, lies a profound exploration of the complex emotions and experiences that arise from a deep sense of displacement and exile. Through her masterful storytelling, Manju Kapur delves into the intricacies of the duality that pervades the lives of those caught in the tumultuous and contradictory interactions between the East and the West. This dualism begets a host of challenges, ranging from the missed opportunities and maladjustments that plague the immigrant experience, to the profound psychological suffering that often ensues from trying to reconcile the contrasting cultures that define their lives. With poignant insight and evocative language, Kapur's work captures the precariousness of the immigrant existence suspended between two worlds, in all its complexity and nuance. Commenting on the themes of the novel, Anupama Chowdhury observes, "socio-political problems of contemporary life portrayed in terms of individual's quest for identity and freedom along with a sensitive handling of issues like gender, sexuality and diaspora make *The Immigrant* a novel with a difference" (41).

The central character, Nina, follows her mother's advice and get married to a Canadian dentist, leaving behind her serene and uncomplicated life as a college professor in New Delhi. However, her move to Halifax, Canada, turns her life upside down, bringing about a profound transformation in her circumstances and surroundings. The allure of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) has long held a spell over parents who envision a charmed existence for their daughters within the diaspora. Nina's future is similarly tethered to this nebulous promise of a brighter tomorrow, underpinned by a false sense of security. Fuelled by these hopes, Nina makes the fateful decision to marry a man from an unfamiliar land. Her journey as an immigrant to Canada marks the beginning of a wholly new and unfamiliar chapter in her life, one that is rife with uncertainty and fraught with challenges. Marrying a less known man and landing in a foreign land caused loneliness to her. The weather, the people and the culture were totally different for her in Canada. It was tough to live at home whole the time and leaving her mother alone back in India. As Jean Paul Sartre talks about immigration in his book *The Age of Reason*, "No one can feel at home in a country that is not their own. There are too many barriers to overcome, and even the language is a constant reminder that you are a stranger in a foreign land" (95). Moreover, Kapur underscores the gender aspect of migration, adding to Nina's burden, as she is saddled with managing the household and raising their child. As Kapur points out, "Nina would never have been able to do this in India" (89). By emphasizing the challenges unique to Nina's experience, Kapur strengthens the argument that her exploitation is primarily due to her immigration and the accompanying cultural dislocation. Though one may argue that Nina's dependence on Ananda stems from her personal choices, Kapur makes it clear that the cultural dislocation and gendered expectations Nina faces as an immigrant contribute to her vulnerability and exploitation. Thus, Kapur effectively shows how Nina's experiences reveal the challenges faced by immigrants who encounter complex and often unforgiving environments in their new lives.

At the outset, Nina tries to seek comfort in the familiar warmth of her husband Ananda's affection. Initially, their marriage seems to be heading in the right direction, but soon enough, Nina is left to fend for herself as Ananda becomes increasingly absent and unable to provide the emotional support she requires to adjust to her new surroundings. Nina is then confronted with the harsh reality of being in a foreign land with a spouse who was practically a stranger to her just a few months ago. This realization hits her like a sudden shock and causes her to feel trapped and isolated within the confines of her marriage. Kapur writes, "Early mornings were the hardest. Often Nina stayed in bed, not happy, not unhappy, scenes from home floating in her mind" (172).

Nina longed to break free from the confinement she felt in her marriage. She yearned for the familiar faces of her friends back in New Delhi, and struggled to adapt to her new surroundings in Canada. Although their marriage appeared to be ideal, it lacked a true emotional connection. Ananda would leave early in the morning for his clinic and return late at night, and their occasional social gatherings felt like mere formalities. Nina eventually discovered that Ananda was sexually inadequate, which contributed to his lack of confidence in the bedroom. He sought medical attention outside of the city, engaging in extramarital affairs to boost his self-esteem. Ananda reveals it to Nina later, "I went for sex therapy, I didn't tell you, I felt embarrassed, also I wasn't sure how humiliating it might be for you, but see, see, it's working, it's working." (Kapur 203). For a brief period of time, things seemed to improve, but soon enough the situation returned to its previous state. Ananda's self-doubt and low self-esteem caused him to adopt a neutral stance towards his marriage with Nina, which gradually led to a decline in their love for each other. Instead of being a bond of love and care, their marriage felt more like a relationship of societal approval. When Nina found a job at the local library, Ananda became more engrossed in his work at the clinic.

However, things took a turn for the worse when Mrs. Hill, Ananda's receptionist, sustained a leg fracture and needed to take a two-month leave. Mandy was hired as the new receptionist in his absence. She was much younger than Hill and inexperienced in her role. Ananda became involved in an extramarital affair with Mandy, which only served to exacerbate the growing distance between him and Nina. Kapur writes,

He went home that first afternoon in a slight daze. A- he had committed adultery. His wife must never know. B – there was no way he could give this up. It was too splendid a thing, C – life was full of surprises and new experiences. He owed it to himself to do them justice. (236)

During Ananda's involvement with Mandy, Nina found herself in an extramarital affair with Anton. Nina and Anton had first met while attending Library School together, and Anton revealed to Nina his general attraction to Asian women. It was during a field trip to the Library of Congress that Nina and Anton had sexual intercourse. For Nina, this encounter with Anton brought a sense of relief after a prolonged period of being married to a neglectful husband. Kapur writes about her mental status, "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). Nina's emotional isolation, as an immigrant and due to her husband's detached behaviour, sets the stage for the exploration of her experiences as she navigates her new life in Canada. The narrative effectively illustrates the struggles of an immigrant in a foreign land, and the emotional isolation and vulnerability that comes with it. As time passed, both Nina and Ananda became increasingly involved in their extramarital affairs, causing their marriage to become increasingly lacklustre. While Nina had begun a relationship with Anton outside of her marriage, it wasn't purely a matter of survival in the given circumstances. Rather, she was attempting to escape the harsh reality of being trapped in a lifeless marriage in a foreign country. Edward Said wrote in his book *Reflections of Exile* about similar things, "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (1).

Nina was in a way incarcerated in her marriage. If we examine Nina's life, we can see that she was married to a man chosen for her by her family who was incapable of loving her and engaged in extramarital affairs. Despite being a postgraduate in literature and teaching at a college, she was unable to secure a similar teaching position in Canada. Additionally, the foreign land proved to be a cultural shock for her, causing her to seek an escape rather than actively seeking solutions for the challenges she faced in her life. In various cultures, it is often believed that the birth of a child enhances the value of family and strengthens the bond between a husband and wife. However, in the case of Ananda and Nina's marriage, there is a long way to go before they can catch up with this belief. Instead of focusing on improving their situation, they became engrossed with individuals outside their marriage. Manju Kapur, a pioneering author, broke a taboo by addressing the issue of male sexual inadequacy in her literary works. In her acclaimed novel, Kapur explores the universal desire felt by many women to experience motherhood and the intense sense of disappointment and distress that arises when this desire is deferred. In Nina's case, her husband's sexual incompetence posed a significant obstacle to her dream of starting a family, which deeply troubled her and threatened to upend her entire life. Kapur writes, "Sex was a form of communication, and if they could not communicate on this most basic level, what about everything else?" (183). Nina subtly ensnares herself in her marriage to Ananda, driven by a blend of cultural expectations, personal insecurities, and the seductive promise of a bright future overseas. At first, the allure of a more prosperous life and the stability Ananda provides entice Nina to silence her reservations and suppress her own aspirations. Gradually, her individuality erodes as she strives to adhere to the roles dictated by her new surroundings and her husband, culminating in a deep sense of entrapment and disillusionment. While it might be argued that Nina's emotional isolation is a result of her own inability to adapt to change, the narrative portrays her struggles as a consequence of the cultural dislocation and exploitation she faces, rather than a character flaw. Her emotional isolation is instead a consequence of the cultural dislocation she experiences as an immigrant and the self-centred behaviour of her husband.

The news of Nina's mother's untimely passing hits her with devastating force, shattering her world and unleashing a torrent of inconsolable grief. As the only child of her parents, Nina is left with the responsibility of making the arduous journey from Canada to India to fulfill her religious obligations and pay her final respects. Struggling to come to terms with the loss of her beloved mother, Nina finds herself grappling with a deep-seated emotional connection to her birthplace and an undeniable sense of detachment from her husband in a far-off land. The pain of this double displacement is acutely felt, exacerbating her sense of isolation and sorrow in the face of this profound tragedy. Following the demise of her mother in India, Nina found herself completely alone with no one to turn to. She had no place to go, no one to confide in, and no one to offer her any kind of support. Even Anton was not present to offer her the moral support she desperately needed. At this point, Nina realized it was time to break free from the constraints of her marriage, which had been imposed on her by society and circumstances. Her library studies gave her the freedom and independence she craved, and with her mother's passing, she felt empowered to live life on her own terms.

What was there to bring her to India again? With no mother to disappoint, nobody's expectations to meet, the bonds of her marriage assumed a different feel. Her life was now completely her own responsibility, she could blame no one, turn to no one. She felt adult and bereft at the same time. (Kapur 326)

After much contemplation, Nina engaged in a heated argument with Ananda, who was attempting to persuade her to stay and reconsider their marriage. However, Nina was not swayed by Ananda's attempts at sympathy, as she felt that he was not fully understanding her situation. Ananda emphasized the opportunities that Canada had provided for Nina, but she had already made up her mind and informed him that she wished to chart her own path for the future. Kapur writes, "She packed her bags and left for Federation on a Greyhound bus. In

her bones she knew she would get the job. Interviews had always been easy for her.” (330). Through the exploitation of Nina, cultural dislocation, and Nina's emotional isolation, Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* sheds light on the challenges faced by immigrants in a foreign land. The novel reveals the harsh realities of the immigrant experience and encourages empathy and understanding towards those who leave their homes in search of a better future. As we navigate our increasingly globalized world, it is essential to recognize the struggles of those who are culturally dislocated and to create a more welcoming and supportive environment for all. Although the novel concludes with Nina's departure and provides no indication of the future of the marriage, the most important aspect is that Nina gave herself a chance to improve her life by leaving a toxic relationship. Her relocation to Canada marks the beginning of a transformative process, as she navigates the challenges of adapting to a new culture while grappling with her own desires and aspirations. Over time, Nina's exposure to different perspectives and experiences empowers her to assert her independence, leading her to pursue further education and a career. “For many women, the expectations they have when they enter marriage may fail to match up to reality. Experts say that they often have a higher expectation of how a partner will meet their emotional needs than men” (Bishop). Researchers believe that “Women are ending their marriages because the relationship is no longer worth the sacrifices required of them. They don't get enough in return” (Lester). This newfound autonomy allows them to redefine their sense of self, ultimately breaking free from the confines of her marriage and cultural expectations. Through Nina's story, Kapur explores themes of personal growth and the quest for freedom, highlighting the complexities and rewards of emancipation in a changing world. Her separation served as her liberation from the constricting bonds of marriage.

Conclusion

Departing from a marriage where one feels trapped like Nina is vital for both mental and emotional well-being. Remaining in such a union can inflict profound psychological distress, erode one's sense of self, and stifle personal growth. Moreover, it sustains a toxic environment that can adversely affect any children involved, instilling in them a harmful pattern of behaviour. Emphasizing one's freedom and happiness is fundamental to crafting a life that is both fulfilling and genuine, paving the way for healthier future relationships and fostering personal development.

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