

## **BOUND BY NORMS, DRIVEN BY DREAMS: WOMEN'S QUEST FOR SELFHOOD IN THE IMMIGRANT**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper delves into the intricate web of family dynamics, shedding light on the challenges of self-discovery and the complexities of identity within changing socio-cultural contexts. Set against a middle-class ethos that emphasizes traditional values, respectability, and self-restraint, *The Immigrant* poignantly captures the subtleties of these relationships. At the core of Nina's journey is her quest for selfhood a pursuit both shaped and complicated by her immigrant identity and the evolving circumstances of her life. Kapur seamlessly weaves together the impact of middle-class values, the exploration of personal identity, and the intricacies of familial bonds, creating a nuanced narrative that gracefully reflects the layered immigrant experience.

**Keywords:** family, self- discovery, identity, self-restraint and middle class.

Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* (2008) narrates the compelling journey of Nina, a 30-year-old lecturer residing in Delhi with her mother, navigating the complexities of singlehood and societal expectations. Her life undergoes a dramatic transformation when she marries Ananda, an N.R.I. doctor, and moves to Canada as a newlywed. Kapur adeptly portrays Nina's experience as she grapples with the challenges of being a married woman in an unfamiliar land, where the foundations of Indian culture and the essence of individualism seem alien and distant.

The novel centers on the theme of marital harmony, evolving the roles of women within the domestic sphere, and the shifts in attitude brought about by changing circumstances. Nina's journey in Canada symbolizes a poignant phase in her life a transformation akin to a butterfly losing its vibrant colors. Kapur captures the isolation Nina feels, with only her husband as her

sole companion and the profound sense of uprootedness from her origins weighing heavily on her.

The Novel, delves deeply into the dynamics of arranged marriage, intertwining personal and cultural narratives. The novel shifts its geographical focus from India to Canada, while maintaining its central theme the complex relationship between men and women. Through her portrayal, Kapur introduces a modern image of the Indian woman, capturing the sexual and psychological dimensions of the man-woman relationship. However, the narrative leans more heavily on the erotic aspects than the psychological.

Sexuality is presented as an integral part of life, yet the protagonist, Nina, is determined to assert her individuality and navigate beyond male dominance. The Novel becomes a profound exploration of the globalized and hybrid identities embraced by educated Indians. Migration, rather than being a form of separation, is depicted as a transformative process a reimagining of the mind, body, and spirit influenced by a new cultural milieu.

The novel is primarily set in two geographical regions; northern India and Canada. It begins with a portrayal of Nina, a young woman in her thirties, awaiting her wedding. She works as an English literature lecturer at Miranda House College in Delhi. Her journey to this career spans seven years completing high school, studying English honors at Miranda House, earning a postgraduate degree, and finally securing a lectureship at her alma mater. These details align closely with the author's own life, as Manju Kapur attended the same institution and pursued a similar teaching career.

Nina's search for fulfillment leads her to a one-room flat in the Jangpura Extension, where she moves in with her widowed mother, hoping to provide her with a better quality of life. The novel offers a detailed description of Nina's physical appearance at the outset and explores her struggle with solitude, which stems from the heartbreak of a failed romantic relationship. This sentiment is encapsulated in the following excerpt:

Nina was almost thirty years old. Friends and coworkers consoled her by praising her luminous complexion and jet-black hair, but this consolation was icy. Nina's epidermis was aware of her age, disseminating it at

certain angles in the mirror. As she walked from the bus stop to the solitary room she shared with her mother, her spirit felt sixty years old. Her heart felt a hundred when she reflected on the numerous years of forlorn longing she had experienced (Kapur 1).

Nina and her mother lead a life devoid of male presence, as Nina's father, passed away at the age of 45 due to a sudden cardiac arrest. In the Indian context, an unmarried daughter is often perceived as a burden and liability for her family. Despite being financially independent and self-reliant, Nina's primary aspiration in life remains marriage. Her mother is deeply preoccupied with this matter and frequently deliberates over the details of her daughter's marriage with whom, when, where, and how?

Nina's search for a suitable partner ultimately concludes with a proposal from Ananda, arranged through Alka, who contacted Nina and her mother via an astrologer they had consulted. Ananda, an Indian dentist, is introduced as a sensitive and intelligent character. Now settled in Halifax, Nova Scotia a city on the eastern coast of Canada, Ananda initially worked as a practicing dentist in Dehradun. Eight years prior, he migrated to Canada at the urging of his maternal uncle, who had established a successful dental practice there. Following the tragic loss of his parents, Ananda embraced life in Canada, where he continues his professional journey and cultivates a meaningful relationship with his Canadian partner.

Manju Kapur reflects on Ananda's aspirations, stating: "Unlike many of his peers, he had never considered abandoning India. His goals were uncomplicated. He desired to provide for his parents and recompense them for the time, affection, and faith they had invested in him" (Kapur 12).

Before Ananda leaves his family home, his parents diligently instill in him values that guide his life. As a Brahmin, Ananda is taught to avoid physical contact with deceased flesh a principle that destiny challenges later in his life. For over twenty-two years, Ananda's maternal uncle, a doctor residing in Halifax, Canada, has encouraged him to move there. Despite his family's reluctance to see him leave for the West, Ananda's brother-in-law (his sister's husband) urges him to seize the opportunity, believing that his own success cannot be shared and

emphasizing the rare chance presented to Ananda, as Manju Kapur writes of this in the following reflection:

Opportunities are overwhelming. If you disregard them, they vow to burden you with regret for the remainder of your life. A missed opportunity refuses to remain hidden; it emerges at the most inopportune times, lowering you even lower (17).

Ananda arrives in Halifax on August 15, a date that symbolizes both his country's independence and his own personal freedom. Halifax, located on the eastern coast of Canada, has a population of approximately 80,000. Ananda works tirelessly to establish himself in this new environment. Under his uncle's guidance, he develops the necessary skills to become a proficient dentist, mastering the profession through rigorous training. His strict vegetarian lifestyle adds another layer of challenges to his adjustment in Canada, making his journey all the more demanding.

Nina did not anticipate how difficult turning thirty would be. Her single status becomes the primary topic of discussion among her mother and relatives, who constantly express their concerns about her unmarried state. However, as Simone de Beauvoir suggests, marriage is not the sole respectable career option available to women. She writes:

There is unanimity that acquiring a spouse, or in some cases, a 'protector,' is the most essential undertaking for her. In her eyes, man embodies the other, just as she does for man; however, this other seems to exist on the plane of the essential, whereas she views herself as the non-essential in relation to him. She will emancipate herself from her father's house and her mother's control by submitting herself passively and submissively into the hands of a new master (449).

Nina is portrayed as a highly educated woman who decides to settle down through an arranged marriage. Having been raised conventionally, she conducts herself accordingly, valuing family and tradition. Despite being financially independent, Nina chooses to accept her family's proposal, demonstrating her maturity and her sense of responsibility toward her family.

Nina has now gained recognition as a respected member of society. In her journey, she discovers that marriage is a profound and transformative experience. To Nina, companionship is the core element that defines a successful marriage. Both Ananda and Nina, as second-generation immigrants, navigate the complexities of life in a foreign country. Nina enters Canada as a wife, not as someone seeking a job or education, which presents unique challenges for immigrants arriving as spouses.

Initially, Nina is not expected to engage in any professional work in Canada. She spends her time waiting for her husband's return and feels unable to utilize her free hours for pursuits such as reading. Her new reality as an immigrant shapes her existence indefinitely:

For immigrant women, the intersection of traditional gender roles and the demands of a new society often leads to a profound sense of displacement, where their identities are shaped by both cultural expectations and the constraints of their new environment (Chowdhury102).

In contrast, Nina longs for a family, children, and the satisfaction of fulfilling her mother's expectations. The marriage proposal is finalized, with Nina's family opting for a civil ceremony to save money. Eventually, the wedding takes place at the Arya Samaj Mandir in Mount Kailash Colony, followed by the marriage registration at Alka's residence in the afternoon. As Simone de Beauvoir notes in *The Second Sex*, "a woman's normal destiny is marriage" (Beauvoir 31). Social pressure ultimately leads Nina to marry Ananda.

Nina's immigrant experience profoundly impacts her emotionally and psychologically, especially in her role as a wife. Overwhelmed by homesickness and isolation, she often sobs when left alone. As a month passes, her longing for familiarity drives her to seek ways to create a sense of belonging in her new environment, such as immersing herself in books. Her changing perspective on relationships becomes evident as she reflects on her relatives, *"In India, these relatives had appeared tangentially, more like tourists than family. Now, her perspective has shifted. She desired proximity to them"* (Kapur 132). This quote highlights Nina's evolving sense

of connection and her desire for meaningful bonds, which are intensified by her immigrant psyche and the need for emotional anchors in a foreign land.

Ananda begins assimilating and acclimating to the new culture ahead of Nina, as the novel vividly portrays two overlapping adaptation processes, the initial phase of Ananda's experience and Nina's subsequent journey. Speaking on their journey Christopher Rollason observes:

Ananda appears in Canada before Nina enters his life; consequently, the novel describes two overlapping assimilation processes, his and then hers. Both progressively convert from the strict vegetarianism of their upbringing to an omnivorous diet, and Nina does the same with her apparel, unable to wear her saris (unsuitable for the climate) and graduating to salwar kameez and then Western dress. In any event, neither has originated from a particularly traditional Indian family heritage (1-10).

This commentary encapsulates the nuanced and layered immigrant experience as depicted in Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*, showcasing the inevitable transformations both Ananda and Nina undergo to navigate the intricate dynamics of identity and cultural integration.

Manju Kapur intricately weaves the Indian political climate of 1975–1977 into the narrative, enriching the novel's context and reflecting the broader societal shifts. This backdrop resonates with Canada's indigenous population, adding layers to the immigrant experience. Nina's struggle to organize her Indian clothing in Canada symbolizes the challenges of cultural adaptation. She gradually abandons her traditional attire of salwar kameez and sari, opting instead for denim, baggy shirts, and outerwear that better suit the harsh Canadian climate. Kapur subtly critiques and reshapes perceptions of gendered attire codes, highlighting the complexities faced by women in navigating cultural transitions.

Manju Kapur captures the essence of immigrant sensibility through the intertwined journeys of Ananda and Nina. The conclusion of the novel is marked by Nina's profound reflection on the transient nature of the immigrant experience:

Perhaps that was the ultimate immigrant experience. Not that any one thing was steady enough to attach yourself to for the rest of your life, but that you found different ways to belong, ways not necessarily lasting, but ones that made your journey less lonely for a while. When something failed it was a signal to move on. For an immigrant there was no going back (Kapur 330).

This poignant conclusion encapsulates the emotional resilience and adaptability required of immigrants. It reflects their ongoing pursuit of belonging, even as they face impermanence and the necessity of reinvention. Kapur's sensitive portrayal invites readers to deeply empathize with the struggles, hopes, and transformations of her characters as they navigate uncharted territories in their search for identity and home.

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