

QUEST FOR SELF: A STUDY OF MANJU KAPUR'S '*HOME*' AND '*THE IMMIGRANT*'

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ABSTRACT

'Home' and 'The Immigrant' is an exploration of the themes of identity and displacement in the two novels by Manju Kapur. The study analyses how the characters in these novels grapple with their sense of self in relation to their physical and cultural surroundings. Through a close reading of the texts, the study examines the impact of Migration, Cultural Hybridity, and the changing social and economic landscape on the characters' sense of self. The study also explores the ways in which the novels reflect the larger socio-political context of contemporary India. Ultimately, the study argues that Manju Kapur's novels offer a nuanced and complex understanding of the individual and collective experiences of migration and identity formation in a rapidly changing World. Her observation of life around her is acute. Her novels are feminist in tone and manner. All her novels deal with the dilemma faced by women in Indian society. She speaks of the middle class and has even earned many comparisons with Jane Austen for her portrayal of the middle class, often trapped in awkward situations and very sharp and chiselled idea of the feminine self. Even for the characterization that happened. Obviously it seems that her characterization is a neat depiction of the structure and fabric of the society.

Keywords: Quest, Self, Hybridity, *Immigrant* and *Home*.

Manju Kapur is an Indian author, born on May 27, 1948, in Amritsar, Punjab. She is a renowned novelist and professor of English at Miranda House, University of Delhi. She has written several novels, including "Difficult Daughters," "A Married Woman," "*Home*," "The Immigrant," "Custody," and "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness." Her works often explore themes of family, marriage, women's roles, and cultural traditions in India. She has received numerous Awards for her writing, including the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book in the Eurasia Region for "Difficult Daughters" in 1999, and the Crossword Book Award for "Custody" in 2011. Besides writing, she has also served as a judge for several literary Awards and has been a visiting faculty member at various Universities around the World.

The Quest for Self is a journey of self-discovery, self-awareness, and self-actualization. It is a process of exploring and understanding one's own identity, values, beliefs, strengths, weaknesses, and motivations. The quest for self can involve a range of activities such as introspection, meditation, mindfulness, therapy, self-help books, and personal development programs. The goal of this journey is to gain a deeper understanding of oneself, to uncover one's true potential and purpose, and to live a more fulfilling and authentic life.

In *Home*, Nisha's quest for an identity begins in her adolescence when under the influence of Rupa's modern thinking; she encounters difficulties of adjustment in her own traditional *home*. Death of her grandfather brings, Nisha back to her house to accompany her lonely grandmother. The transportation of Nisha

to Rupa's house and back to her own house after eleven years deserves attention. In both cases, Nisha's will does not matter. Being a girl implies, being an object to be tossed around the way her parents liked it to be. An enlightened Nisha could not swallow the mindless regressive traditions of her family. Her desire to emphasise her individuality brings her into direct clash with her mother, Sona. Nisha vehemently rejects the notion of keeping fast for would- be husband. The difference between Rupa and Sona is brought forth in the up-bringing of Nisha and so is the relationship between Sonal and Nisha. As Maneeta Kahlon highlights:

“Social structure conditions one's thinking. A person becomes that, under which circumstances he or she lives. We see that two real sisters - Sona and Rupa, born in the same house, are totally different in their thinking after their marriage. It is a result of the atmosphere of their new families. One considers a working woman as emancipated individual, while for the other it is shame.” (Kahlon 07)

This difference in perception is highlighted by the author at all the major events of Nisha's life. The path which Kapur's female protagonists take in their quest for an identity is full of foreseen and unforeseen hurdles. Education takes a backseat in her parental house. The sole concern of Sona is to mould the modern Nisha in the traditional set-up of her family so as to objectify her later in the marriage market. Being a mangalik, Nisha, according to her conservative family, is doomed to have a bad destiny. Kapur brings forth the dichotomy between marriage and education. Nisha is allowed to join a BA Honors course in English Literature in a Girl's college until she gets married. Destiny and Nisha's modern thinking for the second time in her life, divide her from her family. It is particularly in the college that Nisha's quest of herself gains momentum. During her college life, Nisha falls in love with Suresh, a young Engineering student much below her social and economic status. This love affair comes as a blow to the honour of her family. Nisha discovers another aspect of herself in the companionship of Suresh. Passionately yet realistically, Nisha proceeds on her voyage of self-discovery.

The sense of Nisha never leaves her. We get a glimpse of her modern thinking in her stern refusal for physical relationship despite her strong love for her boy-friend, her insistence on marriage to Suresh despite his class and caste, despite the fury of her family members and despite all possible threats to her comfortable life. Nisha stands firm in her decision to marry the person she felt compatible with and emerges a strong-willed woman as opposed to Suresh, who gives in to the threats of Nisha's family. She is forced to give up her relationship with Suresh and to be at *home* to do all household work. Nisha strongly reacts to her objectification for the purpose of marriage and aspires to create a separate identity in business venture. The firmness in Nisha's tone to start a business of her own and her flair in it make her a successful business woman in a short span of time. Her confidence is reflected in the way she tackles professional matters and also balances her relationship with her sister-in-law, Pooja. Nisha's quest for self is fulfilled through her label "Nisha's Creations." It not only grants her economic independence but also lends to her the decision-making power and authority, to state her will to continue her business even after her marriage. Nisha asserts her individuality and emerges a feminist in the way Michele Le Doeuff asserts, “A feminist is a woman who does not allow anyone to think in her place.” (Doeuff 142)

Author seeks freedom for the Indian woman in the socio- cultural set-up. Nisha craves for individual identity, a space for her and undergoes a series of turbulent phase in her life, which began with the sexual abuse

and culminated in acute mental stress after the tragic end of her affair with Suresh. It psychologically re-established the sexual abuse in her childhood along with the memories of her physical relations with Suresh in a disturbing manner that tortured her mind and resulted in eczema which not only affected her physical beauty but also wounded her soul. Nisha's physical suffering due to eczema serves to uncover layers of feelings and emotions which usually camouflage real emotions of human beings. Pooja's covert hatred and indifference towards Nisha is a clear example. Nisha becomes the first woman of her family who goes to college, first to start a business, first to be advertised for, first to be married late and first to marry a widower. Her individualistic spirit is not taken lightly by her family and every effort to curb her identity is resorted to. In her review of *Home*, Malti Agarwal asserts, "Manju Kapur's depiction of her heroine, her traversing the labyrinth of rules and regulations of traditional middle-class-milieus and stepping out to start earning for her existence are superb." (Agarwal 04)

Author's female protagonists do not remain confined to the boundaries set for them. They cross the threshold and challenge their existence in an endeavour to explore space for themselves. Nisha too moves against the grain, strives in quest of herself, asserts it and then succumbs. She appears to be a failure in her acceptance of the patriarchal definitions of a woman. In this context, Kapur says in her interview with Lindsay Pereira, "She does succeed in the terms she has been taught to believe in. No she does not break away completely from the family - but again, that is one of my themes, that joint families can both destroy and preserve simultaneously as it were quite often." (Kapur interviewed by Lindsay Pereira)

Home ironically has a lot of connotations for Nisha - a woman in the Indian society. Her parental *home*, a place of belonging does not belong to her because for a girl her husband's *home* is supposed to be her real *home*. *Home* symbolises a place of shelter and security. But for Nisha it becomes the site of her exploitation - physical, when she was yet a child and psychological, when she undergoes an emotional roller-coaster in her life, as a young beautiful girl. She constantly moves towards and away from her *home*. Earlier in the novel, she is shifted to Rupa's *home*, later; she leaves it for the *home* of Arvind, her husband. Her martial *home* proves to be a cage for this independent soul and chains her spirit with traditions and responsibilities.

Manju Kapur's fourth novel "The Immigrant" is a poignant exploration of the theme of identity, belonging, and displacement through the story of protagonist Nina, an Indian immigrant living in the United States. Through Nina's journey of self-discovery, Kapoor captures the challenges and complexities of immigration, as well as the clash of cultures and the search for identity that often accompanies it. One of the central themes of the novel is the quest for self. Uma Mahadeva Review of Kapur's fourth novel, *The Immigrant* in the following words, "*The Immigrant* is about the loneliness of an entire generation of women who went as wives of Indian men who had migrated in the 70s." (Mahadeva A Review) It mirrors Kapur's own immigrant experience as a Post-graduate student at Dalhousie University, Halifax in Canada. Like Nina the protagonist, the author herself studied and later taught at Delhi University's Miranda House College. When questioned about the impetus to write a novel about *The Immigrants* Kapur in her interview for Faber and Faber admits:

"This was an idea I had for a long time partly as a response to the numerous NRIs (Non Resident Indians) that any Indian is witness to. They strike one as not quite Indian, yet not completely foreign, they

inhabit an in-between space that they themselves are all too aware. In some ways it also means you are fixed in a time warp. I wanted to explore these aspects of settling abroad.” (www.faber.co.uk/article)

Kapur's previous novels are based solely in India with barely one or two visits abroad. In *Difficult Daughters*, Professor Harish is an Oxford-returned man, in *A Married Woman* apart from Hemant's frequent business trips abroad; there is one family tour to the United States, which equates Raju and Pooja's honeymoon trip to Europe in *Home*. Unlike these short visits for specific purpose, *The Immigrant* for a major portion is based in North America, Canada to be particular with a trip to the United States. The similarities appear in terms of theme and the protagonist's restlessness and dissatisfaction with her present which leads her towards the journey in search of an identity.

Away from her *homeland*, familiar circle of friends, family and colleagues, the protagonist Nina's life after an initial brief period of brightness gets enveloped with a deep sense of loneliness. Without work, without people to talk, without any activity which can keep her engrossed like her husband, Nina finds her life in Halifax much more dull, monotonous and lonely than she had in India. Ananda was practically the only and everything she had in Canada. Her inability to conceive the possible reason for which lies in Ananda's sexual problem does much to aggravate her misery. Very soon, Nina feels disillusioned and her dream of a happy life after marriage is shattered to pieces. Nina's loneliness has been pointed out time and again by the novelist at different places in the novel,

“Till Nina came to Canada she hadn't known what lonely meant – the soul-destroying absence of human beings from her life - Having a husband should not have meant such lonely desperation.” (The Immigrant 181)

Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta in her review of *The Immigrant* expresses, “The apartment in Halifax is larger, with softer pillows and springier mattress, but also emptier” (Review: TNE) The emptiness of Halifax finds its *home* in the growing emptiness and sense of isolation in Nina which prompts her to join the La Leche League to find an answer to her cravings for motherhood which she feels would fill the critical gaps in her otherwise lonely married life. She is frustrated by her utter isolation and longs for feelings of togetherness and belongingness. She feels her child will serve to provide a solid foundation to her marriage, a marriage in which she feels completely lost. Nina voices her concern in the feminist group she is a part of,

“I used to be teacher, in fact I taught for ten years before I came here. And now I do nothing. I have not been able to conceive. Am I locked into stereotypical expectations? I don't know.” (The Immigrant 232)

It is her deep-seated loneliness which makes her accept a menial job at the Halifax Regional Library (HRL), a job much below her Indian qualifications and former status as a lecturer, however, significant in the light of the fact that her teaching degree held irrelevant in Canada. Her loneliness takes her further to join the consciousness raising group of her colleague and friend, Beth. This decision increases further the already existent distance in the relationship between Nina and Ananda a little further. The gradual acquisition of her independent identity takes Nina further to join the Killam Library as a full time Library Science student for two

years. It not only equips her professionally and financially but also leads her towards extra-marital affair with a fellow batch mate, Anton.

The protagonist's quest for self has been perceived through the dual lenses of Indian and Western ideals. An emotionally bereaved Nina begins to cling emotionally to Anton. The realisation of her emotional attachment to Anton begins to prick her conscience as she feels her infidelity towards a loyal husband. Her two months visit to India and the vacation which distances her from the proximity of Anton gives her much time to introspect. She decides against the continuation of this relationship any further and moves away from Anton with conviction and determination. Her belief in Anton with whom she decides to move on in a friendly manner is shattered when during their library science tour to the United States; this relationship culminates in a date-rape. This incident traumatises Nina but re-shapes her vision towards herself, her lover and her husband. Strangely enough even to herself, she emerges a strong woman ready to accept the complex challenges of the man-made world. Manju Kapur in her interview with Meneesha Govender reflects:

“Women's lives are far more complicated than the lives of men- women are constantly negotiating being modern, independent human beings, yet also retaining ties to the family their parents, husbands and children - Everyday - women are negotiating a space or pushing the boundaries to create space for themselves.” (Interviewed by Govender: Daily News)

Nina begins her journey in quest of herself after a long, monotonous and lonely period of inactiveness and lack of communication. Her job at the HRL, the local library is the first step in this direction. Apart from leaving her family and friends behind, Nina more importantly leaves her independent identity in India, in bargain of nuptial ties. She gets a cold, unwelcome gesture at Toronto airport, where her identity is that of a coloured woman and wife of a certain Indian immigrant as it is shown in the following lines,

“Rage fills her. Why were people so silent about the humiliations they faced in the West? Though she was addressed as ma'am, no respect is conveyed - she does not like her introduction to the new World.” (The Immigrant, 108-109)

With the practical, self-engrossed relatives and friends whom she meets, Nina's perception of life in the West with its people is shocking. The coldness and reserve in their behaviour appals her and a feeling of homesickness overpowers her. It has been maintained that a job which keeps an NRI engaged for long hours and gives them security and standing with huge sums of money that he accumulates is also a process of assimilation. While Ananda in his endeavour to become a Canadian fast adopts habits like non- vegetarianism, sexual encounter with white Canadian women and involvement in ceremonies which surrounded Christmas and Thanks giving to the extent of bargaining his identity, his name from the Hindu Ananda to the Christian Andy. Nina, with her mature perception fails to be swept away by all things Canadian. She is not convinced with Ananda's blind admiration and questions it, “Since, we aren't from here; your friends must make allowances. Besides, beyond a point, how does it matter what they think?” (The Immigrant 150) Nina's initiation into non-vegetarianism, which was a result of her confused and distressed state of mind, was incomprehensible to the much Canadian Ananda, who perceived the world through the lens of convenience, “You will find life easier

from now on - This grated on her nerves. Her meat eating was the result of fragmentation and distress, not a desire for convenience.” (The Immigrant 271)

Nina's decision to attend the meeting of the La Leche League, visit to Dr. Abbot, to get herself medically examined and understand the reason behind her inability to conceive is yet another step in the direction in which she wants to explore another dimension of herself- the pleasure of being a mother. Her suggestion to Ananda to undergo medical treatment should be taken as an effort to provide a solution to her problem and not as an insult towards her insecure husband as Ananda's male ego takes it. In desperation, Nina moves away further from Ananda and her older self. Sad and lonely, she joins a feminist group, which comprised of eight women. Her introduction to the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan etc. re-shapes her consciousness, her ideals, and her perspective towards herself, her marriage and motherhood. Regular meetings of this group unburden the emotional burden which Nina carried, silently and gradually unknown to her. Though she does not identify completely with whatever Beauvoir or Friedan said yet she learns to respect herself for what she was. It gives her a platform of communication and serves to lessen her anguish. Nina begins to think in terms of establishing herself professionally and financially, the two ways in which she can attain an independent identity, a dream which disturbs her soul but which she fails to acknowledge. The issue of motherhood takes a backseat and quest for an identity becomes her priority. Nina asserts strongly to Ananda, “I need to find my feet in this country. I can't walk on yours.” (The Immigrant 216)

The journey in quest of herself, which began at the Halifax Regional Library, finds its legitimate calling in the new identity of Nina as a student of Library Science. Here, she shines and explores the multi-faceted aspects of her personality. Apart from giving an order to her days, the course proves to be an enabling experience for Nina. Her six months affair with Anton does much to transform her mentally as well as physically. A visibly satisfied, confident and glowing Nina is in total contrast to the frustrated, nervous and uncertain Nina whom the readers meet at the beginning of the novel. There is an intense psychological growth which lends a maturity to her character.

In her quest for self the notion of leading a happy married life with children to fulfil the critical gaps between Ananda and herself gets utterly changed. Nina no more thinks in terms of children, maternal longings and obligations rather as a true Western woman in form as well as spirit begins to face the world on her own terms. The death of her mother in India not only puts an end to her older self but also frees her from the bondage of fake matrimony. It serves to sever all her ties with India, the land where she was recognised as her former self. Her mother's death, ironically enough gives birth to a New Nina. It coincides with her interview call from the University of New Brunswick and her wrongly timed discovery of Ananda's extra-marital affair. It gives her an insight into the reality of their marriage and empowers her to decide her future course of action. Kapur has left the ending of the novel ambiguous for the readers to decipher the meanings according to their different temperaments and understanding. A new, enlightened, confident, autonomous and independent Nina moves further to explore other aspects that camouflage her identity. As it is shown,

“The continent was full of people escaping unhappy pasts. She too was heading toward fresh territories, a different set of circumstances, and a floating resident of the Western world. When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be *home*.” (The Immigrant 334)

Through Nina's discovery of her own hidden self, Kapur voices her views on Indian feminism. “Her mother had died and she was entertaining thoughts of Ananda being her solitary anchor in the world.” The same ideas are also reflected in the following description:

“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, and 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.” (The Immigrant 328)

Nina's quest for an identity and her success in attaining it can be taken as her answer to the Western perception of India which views it as a land of exoticism. In her initial meetings with the friends and relatives of Ananda, the traditionally dressed Nina experiences a deep sense of identity crisis when she is viewed as an exotic entity a generalisation far away from the image of real India and its people. She fails to identify with the exotic pictures that adorn the Taj Mahal restaurant, however, later in the novel; her acute sense of identity crisis lends her a romantic sense of identification with the proceedings of the Kumbh Mela reported by the CBC. This identification can be understood and appreciated in terms of the loneliness and distance which immigration involves. Throughout the novel, Kapur gives us an insight into the psyche of the immigrants, their sense of loss, isolation, rootlessness, hybridity, nostalgia, identity crisis and the subsequent quest for an identity. Nina is a convincing example as it is shown,

“Certain Indians become immigrants slowly - These immigrants are always in two minds. Outwardly they adjust well - they allow misleading assumptions about a heart that is divided.” (The Immigrant 122-123)

The findings of her both novels "*Home*" and "*The Immigrant*" explore the quest for self in their own unique ways. Both novels focus on the struggles and challenges faced by the characters as they try to find their place in the World, both as individuals and as part of a larger society. In "*Home*," the protagonist, Nisha, returns to her childhood *home* in Delhi after many years living in the United States. She is confronted with the stark reality of her family's financial struggles and the harsh societal norms that govern their lives. Through her experiences and interactions with family members, friends, and acquaintances, Nisha begins to question her own values and beliefs, ultimately leading her to a deeper understanding of herself. In the second novel "*The Immigrant*," the protagonist, Nina, moves to Canada from India in pursuit of a better life. She faces numerous challenges, including racism, discrimination, and cultural barriers. Throughout the novel, Nina struggles to reconcile her Indian identity with her new Canadian identity, ultimately leading her to a better understanding of herself and her place in the World.

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