

Feminine Voice in Manju Kapur's "The Immigrant"

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Starting in 1960s in the United States, feminism as a movement has gathered a lot of momentum. In the post colonial India, the female writers have raised feministic voice through their female characters. Manju Kapur, in her novel "The Immigrant" has tried to raise the feminist voice through Nina and other female characters. Nina, who is a lecturer at Miranda House in Delhi, marries an NRI and settles in Canada. She has to face a lot of problems to settle there as she finds herself caught up in a kind of an inescapable web. By deciding to leave her husband who is totally indifferent to her, Nina tries to reinvent herself and make her own identity. Another character in the novel Zenobia, who is Nina's friend, stands for total liberty of the women.

Key words: feminism, indifference, liberty, identity, problems.

In the modern era of rapid progress in every field such as communication and technology, education among others, women of India are also becoming free from the age old shackles. They are shedding off their core self and femininity and have their voice in every walk of life. The spread of education has made them discontented with their lot in the traditional role of trapped and beleaguered housewives. Betty Friedan observes: "Many young women- certainly not all- whose education plunged them into a world of ideas feel stifled in their homes. They find their routine lives out of joint with their training. Like 'shut-ins' they feel 'left out'".

The image of woman in Indian fiction has transformed tremendously since its beginning. From a meek, submissive and obedient person in the novels by the writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya, and Kamla Markandaya among others, she has now become a self-confident, self assertive and even rebellious personality like the protagonists in the novels by the writers like Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and Manju Kapur. They are aware of their rights and want absolute freedom from the age old shackles. The modern woman is not merely a "Second Sex" today as Simone de Beauvoir calls her.

Manju Kapur is an Indian novelist of the contemporary era who has written six novels till now, "Difficult Daughters", "A Married Woman", "Home", "The Immigrant", "The Custody" and "Brothers". The present paper attempts to discuss the feminine voice in Manju Kapur's fourth novel "The Immigrant" which was published in 2008. As all of us know that feminism is generally perceived as a political agenda which developed in 1960s in the United States. This was a powerful movement for the equal status of women in every sphere of life. The developed countries had already given equal rights to women but many developing countries were disturbed by this concept. Various theories such as radical feminism, Marxist feminism, post-colonial feminism, psychoanalytical feminism etc. came as a result on the basis of various connotations. As far as feminist concepts are concerned, one should try to understand the predicament and dilemma of the women within the context of the society and culture to which they belong. Only this kind of ideology creates a conscious awareness of women's problems. In this regard, Mohanty's comment is worth mentioning in which he tells about the feminist struggle which can occur simultaneously at two interconnected levels: "an ideological discursive level which addresses questions of representation

(womanhood/femininity) and a material, experiential, daily-life level which focuses on the micropolitics of work, home, family, sexuality etc.”(1991:21)

In India also, feminism, as a distinct movement, has been a long unending debate which is still not in a clearly defined state as “Indian Feminism”. In India, there is a general skepticism about its usefulness. Vrinda Nabar, in her work “Caste as Woman” observes: “Patriarchal religious traditions and overt or covert conservative super structures have kept it from becoming widely apprehended phenomena”.(7)

Manju Kapur’s fourth novel “The Immigrant” is set in the 1970s which was the era of emergency in India. It focuses on the problems of the immigrants in adjusting to an alien land. It also focuses on the feminine voice with the help of the female characters like the protagonist Nina, her mother, her sister-in-law and her friend Zenobia. The novelist delves deep into the psyche of Nina and her mother at times in the novel while Zenobia and Alka have not been developed fully and serve as flat characters in the novel. The novel begins with Nina’s severe consciousness that she has become thirty years old and the prospect of her marriage is going bleaker day by day. Though she is a working lady, working as a lecturer in English Literature at Miranda House, and around her there are many spinsters “ like Miss Kapoor of the Economics department, like the misses Hingorani and Rao of her own, like Miss Lal of History or Miss Krishnamurthy of Sanskrit!”(3), she has a bitter consciousness of being “thirty, thirty, thirty.”(3) She lives in a shabby rented flat at Jungpura Extension with her widowed mother who is always worried for her daughter’s marriage to a decent boy. The mother feels so insecure for her daughter that she even goes to the local bus stop when Nina gets late. Finally, with the help of an astrologer, she finds a suitable match for her daughter and who is an NRI and settled as a dentist in Canada and it gives her , like all Indian mothers, a great relief.

Generally speaking, the relationship of marriage, at least in India, is understood as an everlasting relationship between two persons. It implies men and women sharing understanding, feeling of companionship, love, affection, sex etc. there is a section of feminists who hold that marriage is a bond that thrusts women into the role of servants or slaves and creates a negative image within them. Manju Kapur in “The Immigrant” tries to show the suffering, mental and physical, that the women undergo and how they react in a particular situation. Nina, after going to Canada, feels utterly lonely and her loneliness increases when she thinks of having a baby. But “Ananda doesn’t want to hear the implications of this. They have not been married that long, what is the hurry?”(161) The husband is unable to understand a woman’s mental agony and Nina keeps on suffering. With the help of Sue, a Canadian family friend, she consults the ladies of La Leche League, a club which consists nursing mothers and some of them had had trouble conceiving. Writes Kapur: “Helplessness, loss of control and a lack of confidence in her femininity. That was a sterile woman’s profile.”(165)

Manju Kapur also plays around with the post-colonial dilemma through the female characters in the novel. Nina always feels a kind of hesitation to talk to her husband about the problems she faces. For example, she doesn’t ask Ananda clearly and in a forceful way to see Dr. Abbot who had asked Nina to bring her husband for some medical tests and treatment. When she is raped by Anton during a fieldtrip in New York, she gives a bowdlerized version of what had happened. As she had physical relation with Anton, she is afraid to tell her husband. Ponders Nina: “If she exposed him, that would mean exposing herself as well. He would use their liaison to defend himself. The whole affair would be out, and her integrity questioned. She shrank from any gaze, so inevitable once she opened her mouth.”(309) The dilemma is also evident in her mother’s decision when her father dies and her mother is unable to decide whether she should live with her in-laws or not. Here Nina shows some courage and brings her mother to Delhi as they were unwelcome in their ancestral home in Lucknow. But Nina does not keep this kind of courage throughout the narrative. It is at

last that she shows some courage when, finding a wavy blond hair on Ananda's bed, she decides to leave Ananda and find "fresh territories" (330) for herself. Even now she does not retaliate openly but applies for a post of Librarian in a university away from Halifax. When Ananda asks: "Away from me. Why don't you say it?" Nina reiterates: "Yes, away from you." (329)

In Manju Kapur's novels one finds powerful suffering arising from pain, waiting, separation, emotional split in couples' banishment from one's homeland, disease and death of relatives. Nina feels frustrated at home as Ananda remains busy at his dental clinic. She keeps waiting for him and has reminiscences of Indian life style and meals. She wants to be close to her relatives whom she considered as peripheral and insignificant in India. She suffers the death of her mother whom she loves deeply and who has been her closest. After her mother's death, she has a feeling that she has no one in the whole world and she has become an immigrant forever but she reconciles herself when, on her return, Ananda says, "I missed you" (324). She answers with a sigh, "Now there is only you" (324). Awareness of guilt, fear of public humiliation, and indifference are other characteristics of Manju Kapur's novels. Nina does not tell about the rape for fear of public humiliation. Her husband Ananda remains indifferent to her feelings. He feels guilty also for his relation with his receptionist which is evident when Nina thinks about "his strange indifference interspersed with tenderness, the shifty look that skittered about her." (324)

The boldest female character in the novel, though a minor one, is Zenobia about whom writes Kapur: "Abandoned by marriage after six years, but with parental money and an independent flat. Been there, done that was her attitude to matrimony. Her life was now filled with nephews, nieces, good friends (Nina the chief one), supportive family, occasional sexual encounters and a passion for teaching. She frequently urged Nina to go abroad for higher studies, that being her only chance of finding a decent guy, for Indian men were mother-obsessed, infantile, chauvinist bastards." (8) This brief description about Zenobia is sufficient to tell about her personality. But Nina is shown just her opposite. Like Virmati of "Difficult Daughters" she had a secret relationship with a teacher of hers who was fifteen years older than her. He used Nina for his physical needs as long as he could and abandoned her. But unlike Virmati, Nina did not tell anyone and grieved silently at the deceit and told no one at all. Here, through Nina, Kapur shows the powerful mental suffering of her protagonist which she shows in almost all her novels.

The main theme of "The Immigrant" is not rebellion or to raise the feminine voice. Rather, it is the sexual dysfunction angle on which Manju Kapur focuses in the novel. In an interview with Jai Arjun Singh, published in the "Elle" magazine August 2008 issue, Manju Kapur herself explains: "In this case, I didn't want Nina to get pregnant, and then I had to have a reason for that. Baby is out. Why is baby out? Infertility was not enough of a reason and I didn't want anything as extreme as impotence – there was more dramatic potential in a lingering dissatisfaction, which led me to Ananda's sexual problem." (August 9, 2008)

The sexual problem which Ananda is facing in the novel becomes the root cause of the gap between the husband and the wife and thus responsible for Nina's final decision to find her own place where "there is no going back". (330) Now Nina won't do what her mother had done after her father's death. She is not meek like her mother who will go on bearing everything silently. Rather she is "a floating resident of the Western world." (330) She can not cling to the relations which are based on shallow roots. She is now in the process of reinventing herself. Writes Kapur: "When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull up your shallow roots and move. Find a new place, new friends, a new family. It had been possible once, it would be possible again." (330) Here Kapur emphasises the need for self-awareness and identification of oneself. She shows interest in the female psyche, and the working of a woman's mind. Nina strives not for better materialistic life but for individual recognition. She wants to establish an identity and individuality of

her own. She struggles on an ‘ ideological ‘ level and also at a ‘ practical ‘ level. She does not want to have the status of the ‘other’ as Beauvoir holds but ‘essential’ in society.

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