

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Quest of Feminine Identity in the Relocated Protagonist of Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*

Dr Archana Rathore

Associate Professor,
Department of English,
DAK Degree College,
Moradabad, U.P., India

DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2018.3.3.06

“The formation of a diaspora could be articulated as the quintessential journey into becoming; a process marked by incessant regroupings, recreations, and reiteration. Together these stressed actions strive to open up new spaces of discursive and performative postcolonial consciousness.”

—OkwuiEnwezor

Abstract

When it comes to Diasporic consciousness, the question of roots and routes will always be an integral part of it. To go away from one's roots in order to traverse different swashbuckling routes, one needs to have strong incentive behind it. But what happens to the emotional health of the people who tug along with such career wannabees, like wives or parents, for that matter? The novel vividly deals with the predicament of identity of the individuals. The question becomes more pertinent when the immigrants have a substantial identity at their native nation. Like, for Sue's grandmother it was perfectly all right with an altogether new name of her husband, though she was used to Greek names. The basic reason cited by Sue is that they were very poor and they immediately got married to each other the moment they landed and they had no hesitation in adopting Canadian identity. “They made effort to mingle as fast as possible. Even though their English was limited, they didn't insist their children learnt Greek. Then my mother married a Scottish Canadian, and I married someone of Polish origin. End of Greece.” So, what was summed up (and finished off) so nicely by Sue was a matter of grave concern for Nina. She cannot bring home the point that new beginnings had to take the route of new names. She comes to wonder at the precariousness of the identity crises or for that matter what it meant to belong to somewhere.

Keywords: Identity, Sensitization, Expatriate, Migration, Diaspora, Displacement

The Immigrant is a novel about expatriates Ananda and his wife Nina. Ananda is a doctor who goes to Halifax, Canada to pursue his doctoral thesis. His initial anchor there is his uncle

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

but then his uncle advises him to move out and carve a niche for himself independently in the country of his dreams. Nina is an English lecturer in Delhi University whose mother's only aspiration is to get her married. She is on the verge of losing her patience, when finally the matrimonial ad saves her dream to get shattered at the age of 30 and a knight in shining armour comes to take her daughter to a foreign land. After a short and interesting courtship stint, the couple flies to Halifax and here the new trajectory for Neena starts. In this foreign land, she comes to understand the real connotation of terms like friends, family, relatives, festivals, celebrations and culture. The novel is also a saga of what compromises Nina is able to make and what she is not at all able to accept. She realizes that the Canadian friends of Ananda can never be compared with his uncle and aunt in terms of answerability.

As a woman, she gropes for identity in this foreign world. Being a working woman in India would be her first choice any day than being a sitting-at-home woman at Halifax! But being an unmarried burden on her mom Vis a vis being married? Hmm! Here comes the difficult part! She had to be married to relieve her mom of the responsibility that her father had left on her shoulders.

For Nina, names come as something very integral to one's personality. In fact, names define the person. But Ananda finds the change of name as a means to assimilate with the new identity. But what comes as a shock to Nina is Ananda's asking her to call him Andy, "last night, perhaps in consonance with her new look, Ananda had asked Nina to call him Andy. She had refused. It was foreign, Christian, western, and to use the word Andy in her own home would be to carry alienation into the bedroom. Ananda had not persisted, but the very fact that he had asked suggested desires she found disturbing." (pp 156)

There was a subtle distinction between call me Andy and my name is Andy, which Sue was not in a position to appreciate. To sensitize her, Nina briefly described Ananda's efforts to assimilate. Her thoughts at this point are similar to Dionne Brand's statements, "'The Door of No Return - real and metaphoric as some places are, mythic to those of us who are scattered in the Americas today. To have one's belonging lodged in a metaphor is voluptuous intrigue; to inhabit a trope; to be a kind of fiction. To live in the Black Diaspora I think is to live in a fiction- a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to be being living inside and outside herself. It is to apprehend the sign one makes yet to be unable to escape it except in radiant moments of ordinariness made like art. To be a fiction in search of its most resonant metaphor then is even more intriguing."

The quest of identity hinges on different parameters like the sense of alienation. Cultural differences, loneliness, difference between the progressive and progressed worlds too, relationships and their multifarious dimensions, and of course the difference in perceptions between husband and wife, and for that matter difference in priorities in the immigrant and her lover Ashton. The quest of identity cannot leave the internal battles of heart and mind, moral and immoral.

She is bewildered at the extent of cultural differences between the two countries. Birthdays used to be the main pivot around which all the family gatherings revolved but here

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

in Canada, people would have their gatherings at occasions like Thanksgiving and Christmas. While Nina cannot come to terms with Thanksgiving and Christmas as the biggest events, Ananda is full of accolades for them. 'Her husband was talking another language. Canadian perhaps. (pp162)

The hardest thing to deal with is loneliness and when you start missing your country, you start missing out on every small detail or idea attached to it. Nina admits that she never had a penchant for Kumbhmela as she was also a modern and educated woman but "Yearning for home did strange things to the mind." (pp164) So much so that she starts drawing an exotic and also erotic pleasure out of it and starts visualizing herself drenched in the cleansing Sangam waters as one of the buxom heroines draped in wet saris.

Till Nina came to Canada she hadn't known what lonely meant. At home one was never really alone. The presence of her mother, the vendors who came to the door, the half hour gardener who watered their plants, the part time maid who washed and cleaned, the encounters with the landlady, all these had been woven into her day." (pp177) Yearning for home did strange things to the mind. Even though she despised cheap nostalgia, the way she had reacted to the Kumbhmela was proof that living in a different country you become a different person. (pp175)

The loneliness depicted by a woman who yearns to become pregnant is vividly presented by Manju Kapur and there can be a beautiful comparison with a contrasting situation of the pregnant Ashima Ganguly of Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'. She compares the state of pregnancy as being something foreigner and one can realize her quest of identity "Though no longer pregnant, she continues, at times, to mix Rice Krispies and peanuts and onions in a bowl. For being a foreigner Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy -- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been an ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect." When she goes on to say that even after she is done with her pregnancy, she feels herself a foreigner only.

The tryst with loneliness increases when your spouse sees the immigrant country as different from how you perceive the country. Ananda has high hopes for their child and he wants to make him no less than the President of Canada while Nina is fully aware of the incidents of racial hatred that were reported frequently in the newspaper.

The metaphor of paper napkin sticker of Papa Gino, poor boy from Italy turned into a big enterprising immigrant gives some solace to Nina to follow his footsteps after she got the Commonwealth scholarship to study in any American university. The things had been bad to Nina hitherto because she was not doing anything, other than being the sit at home wife of Ananda. But after her scholarship triumph, she "had a sense of her own self, entirely separate from the other people, autonomous, independent." And that had given her so much confidence that the adultery that she got involved into with Anton didn't perturb her beyond

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

the initial shock. But she really needed to earn her dollars dawned on her when she confronts Ananda with 300 dollars bill of her cashmere sweater, he gets so angry that he starts berating her in his loudest decibels and replenishes his debt list to the nth time before her. The skirmishes go on to the level of resolving Nina that she will be buying clothes when she has money of her own while Ananda retorts, "It's not as though I don't buy you things. I don't think you can accuse me of stinginess."

But no matter how indulgent she is with Anton, she doesn't stop missing her home. During one of the walks, when Anton inquires that she must miss her home, she replies dryly, "I do. My husband says I must think of this as our home, otherwise I will never get used to it."

When we are delineating with the quest of Identity in the relocated Nina, then we must look into the subsequent relationships that she makes. Moreover, her romantic relationships are what define the restlessness in her personality. She realizes that everything is ephemeral. Though she is initially euphoric at being made the center of adulation by Anton, her co-scholar, but then she detests her stance as a fun past time by him in the absence of his wife. Her first lover had taken her virginity and her hopes, her second lover had been her husband, her third had made her international.

When she is with Anton, she feels exquisitely powerful, exactly like the words of Roman Payne "She is free in her wildness, she is a wanderess, a drop of free water. She knows nothing of borders and cares nothing for rules or customs. 'Time' for her isn't something to fight against. Her life flows clean, with passion, like fresh water." But soon, this euphoria evaporates when she realises that she is reckoned no more than a sex machine by Anton, the man who once seemed patient, good tempered and uninvolved. And after a non-communication of many days, he again made sexual advancements towards her that she found sluttish and despicable. And then the love making turns into a coercive rape. Looking at Anton's jabbering about how they felt together earlier now makes no sense to her and she can totally identify with Rebecca West when she quotes "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat." And even with Ananda, she feels defeated when she comes back from her mother's last rituals. She understands that all her feelings could only be seen as nothing but drama. And now the only choice left with her is to apply for jobs everywhere but Halifax. She comes to the point of no return. And finally, she gets a call from the University of New Brunswick for an interview. We can see her position in the words of Bhanu Kapil:

"It is psychotic to draw a line between two places.

It is psychotic to go.

It is psychotic to look.

Psychotic to live in a different country forever.

Psychotic to lose something forever.

The compelling conviction that something has been lost is psychotic.

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Even the aeroplane's dotted line on the monitor as it descends to Heathrow is purely weird ambient energy.

It is psychotic to submit to violence in a time of great violence and yet it is psychotic to leave that home or country, the place where you submitted again and again, forever. Indeed, it makes the subsequent involuntary arrival a stressor for psychosis.”

The novel comes to the conclusion with a heart wrenching event of Nina's mother dying in oblivion, without her earnest wish getting fulfilled. She had always aspired to see the picture of herself alongwith Nina and her grandchild and she had promised to come to Canada when Nina gave birth to the baby. This grief gnaws at Nina's soul that she was the only theme of her mother's dreams and she left her back in India to come to the country of dreams of her husband. But what Nina was left with was “helplessness, loss of control and a lack of confidence in her femininity. That was a sterile woman's profile”.(pp246) Now with the death of her mother, she has no one in India to call her home, so she has to come back to Canada. The novel ends with Nina's quest for identity being quenched with her finding a place for herself by her own merits, not in the country of her parents, nor there with her husband, but with her own merit, “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.” (pp 334)

References

- Kapur, Manju. *The Immigrant*. Random House India. 2008
- Lahiri Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. Harper Collins Publishers India. 2006
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. 1994. Vintage
- Sharma.S. L. “Perspectives on Indians Abroad.” *The Indian Diaspora*. Ed. N. Jayaram. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004. Print.
- Saharan, Asha. “Female Body: Site of Culture- “A Study of Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*”. *Labyrinth: Volume-3, No.4 October-2012, ISSN 0976-0814*. Print.
- Kapil.Bhanu. *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*. Kelsey Street Press 2001.
- Payne, Roman. *The Wanderness*. Aesthete Press. 2013
- Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return*. Penguin Random House. 2002