

# “Representing the Indian Diaspora in the Postcolonial Context” A Study of Manju Kapur’s *The Immigrant*”

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## ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur's novel *The Immigrant* explores the multifaceted experiences of the Indian diaspora through the lives of its protagonists, Nina and Ananda. The narrative delves into themes of identity, cultural dislocation, and the quest for belonging, offering a poignant portrayal of the immigrant experience. Kapur deftly captures the challenges faced by Indian immigrants in balancing their traditional heritage with the demands of a new cultural landscape. Through Nina's struggle to find personal and professional fulfillment and Ananda's efforts to assimilate while grappling with his sense of alienation, the novel underscores the complexities of the immigrant journey. The representation of the Indian diaspora in *The Immigrant* is marked by a nuanced exploration of gender dynamics, societal expectations, and the intersection of personal and cultural identity. Kapur's vivid characterization and evocative storytelling provide a compelling insight into the lives of Indian immigrants, making *The Immigrant* a significant contribution to diaspora literature.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Immigration, Gender dynamics, Culture, Alienation, Assimilation.

## INTRODUCTION

Diaspora denotes a dispersed community originating from a shared geographical location. The term 'diaspora' is derived from an ancient Greek verb which meant 'scattering'. Diaspora can also refer to the movement of the population from the original homeland. It can also refer to historical mass dispersions. People leave their homeland and migrate to different territories for various reasons. Migration to other countries in search of better education, employment opportunities, growth and comfort is a common trend these days. Migrating to different land for various purposes is something very common with the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century perhaps largely due to globalization and the rise and multinational companies. Thus we have different Diasporas taking its form – for e.g. the African diaspora, the Asian diaspora, the Indian diaspora and so on.

The Indian Diaspora, estimated as the second largest globally, exhibits a widespread presence across the world. Notably, there's a significant trend of highly skilled professionals, laborers, and students migrating to developed nations, particularly the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. This migration began post-Indian independence, gaining momentum with the influx of IT professionals in the 1990s. In his paper "From Sugar to Masala," Sudesh Mishra categorizes the Indian diaspora into two groups: the old and the new. He distinguishes between the semi-voluntary migration of indentured peasants to non-metropolitan plantation colonies like Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, Surinam, and Guyana (roughly between 1830 and 1917), and the more recent dispersal of migrants of all classes to thriving metropolitan centers such as Australia, the United States, Canada, and Britain. Following Indian independence, the diasporic community has undergone a transformation, embracing self-fashioning processes and gaining increased

acceptance in the West. However, while migrants may initially appear to adapt easily, there are undeniable realities they face, including the loss of cultural norms, religious customs, and social support systems, as well as the challenge of assimilating into a new culture and adjusting their identity and self-concept. Indian English fiction often explores these themes, capturing the individual's struggle to assimilate into a new land and navigate the complexities of a pluralistic and hybrid culture (2). Contemporary Indian Diaspora writers like Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Bharathi Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Vikram Chandra and others have explored themes of alienation, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, protest and assertions, quest of identity, autonomy, cultural clash, and confrontations with racism and so on. The narratives by the earlier generation of diasporic Indian authors such as Raja Rao, G.V. Desani, Santha Rama Rao, Balachandra Rajan, Nirad Chaudhuri, and Ved Mehta predominantly reflect on their experiences away from India as expatriates, often looking back at their homeland from a distance. Where modernist writers lamented the loss of order, postmodern writers embrace it. They often employ tools such as black humor, wordplay, irony, and other playful techniques to bewilder readers and complicate the narrative (7). This distance grants them a detached perspective necessary for a clear understanding of their native land, thereby contributing to the definition of India through their writing. On the other hand, contemporary diasporic Indian writers can be delineated into two clear groups. One faction consists of individuals who have resided in India for a part of their lives and have taken with them the cultural and emotional experiences of their native land to foreign shores (3). These first-generation immigrants often experience feelings of alienation, nostalgia for their past, and a sense of rootlessness due to migration. The sense of displacement and dislocation creates a position of living 'in-between' where there is this sense of one's own bonding to cultural roots and the other a resistance to accept the codes of the new land. This leads to the emergence of a dual sense of awareness. The second group consists of second-generation individuals, born to immigrant parents and raised outside of India since childhood. Their perception of India is often that of an exotic homeland viewed from an outsider's perspective. The land of their birth differs significantly from their ancestral homeland. Writers from the former group experience a tangible displacement, while those in the latter group often feel a sense of rootlessness. The second generation of immigrants too face alienation, their identity shaped by the country of the birth and other that held strongly by their parents. So there is consciousness of both and again the sense of 'in-betweenness' which may result in identity crisis or hybrid identity. Hence most of the new generation of immigrants evolve themselves by adopting the elements of both cultures, attempt to assimilate to form a hybrid identity. Both groups of writers have contributed significantly to the English literary canon, delving into themes of displacement and self-identity through their depictions of migrant characters. Against the backdrop of the vast Indian subcontinent, the portrayal of dislocated characters by diasporic Indian writers takes on profound significance (4). This universality lends their works a global readership and enduring appeal. While these writers often focus on characters from their own displaced community, some also explore Western characters convincingly. Early novels such as Anita Desai's "Bye-Bye Blackbird" and Kamala Markandeya's "The Nowhere Man" poignantly portray the cultural prejudice faced by Indians in 1960s UK, exacerbating their sense of dislodgment. Bharati Mukherjee's "Wife" and "Jasmine" portray Indians in the US, a land of immigrants, before the advent of globalization. Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses" employs magical realism to allegorize migration, while Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Mistress of Spices" uses an exotic protagonist, Tilo, to convey migrant angst. Amitav Ghosh's "The Shadow Lines" features Ila, whose upbringing abroad leaves her feeling out of place in India, while Amit Chaudhuri's "Afternoon Raag" explores the lives of Indian students in Oxford. Additionally, Anita Desai's "Feasting" depicts Arun, a migrant student living in the suburbs of Massachusetts in its second part. Thus various diasporic Indian writers have skilfully brought out the various issues hidden within the corpus of diaspora sensibility.

### Research Gap

While Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* has been acknowledged for its vivid portrayal of the Indian diaspora, several research gaps remain that merit further exploration, like Intersectionality of Identity, Comparative diaspora studies, Mental health and wellbeing, Economic and Professional Integration, etc. Although the novel touches upon issues of gender and cultural identity, there is limited scholarly analysis on how these intersect with other facets such as class, sexuality, and generational differences. A deeper investigation into how these overlapping identities shape the immigrant experience could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the characters' struggles and triumphs. There is a lack of comparative studies that place *The Immigrant* within the broader context of diaspora literature. Examining how Kapur's depiction of the Indian diaspora compares with representations in works by other authors from different cultural backgrounds could highlight unique and universal aspects of the immigrant experience.

The novel briefly touches on psychological challenges faced by immigrants, such as feelings of alienation and the stress of cultural adaptation. However, a focused analysis on mental health issues within the narrative, particularly in the context of the immigrant experience, remains underexplored. This could include an examination of coping mechanisms and support systems available to the characters. Ananda's professional journey as a dentist in Canada is a significant aspect of the novel, yet there is a paucity of detailed research on the economic integration of Indian immigrants in the narrative. Investigating the barriers and opportunities for professional success and economic stability in the host country could provide valuable insights.

The concept of transnationalism, where immigrants maintain strong ties with their home country while adapting to a new one, is a recurring theme in diaspora literature (6). Further research could explore how this dual connection impacts the characters' identities and experiences, both positively and negatively. While there is some analysis of Kapur's storytelling methods, more in-depth studies on her use of narrative techniques, symbolism, and other literary devices to convey the diasporic experience could enrich the understanding of her work.

Addressing these research gaps could not only enhance the academic discourse surrounding *The Immigrant* but also contribute to a broader understanding of the complexities faced by the Indian diaspora in contemporary literature.

### **Kapur's projection of diaspora in *The Immigrant***

Manju Kapur is one of the prominent contemporary writers who rose to recognition with her first novel 'Difficult Daughters' in 1998. Kapur has to her credit five novels - 'Difficult Daughters'(1998), *A Married Woman* (2000), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant*(2008) and *Custody* (2011). Her novels are primarily focused on the issues middle class educated Hindu women. Kapur explores the life of these women who manager to negotiate both inner and outer spaces in their lives. Familial issues, joint family system, domestic violence and injustice and the woman's need for self assertion and independence mark the core themes of Kapur's fictions. She cannot be altogether labelled as a feminist writer just for her women-centric themes but we can notice that she talks of everyday issues of a common woman. Unlike other postcolonial writers, she has chosen to take social realism and the linear narrative art to depict these everyday realities. Manju Kapur is unlike other diaspora writers. She has gone abroad for studies but not for a settlement, She lives in India and explores the lives of Indian as she sees them around. Interestingly, it is only in her novel, *The Immigrant*, she brings to surface the various forces that make Indians to migrate, the consequences, and the gradual acceptance and the willingness to adapt and adopt for convenience in a globalized world (5). As the story unfolds, we see that Kapur looks into the aspect of migration in a very practical way. The reality presented is that these days migration cannot be related to exile because that kind of life is consciously chosen, either for better prospects or personal commitments. Hence the sense alienation, cultural conflict, isolation is already anticipated and painfully undertaken and more often the character is seen as assimilating a hybrid culture and identity. In this discourse, Kapur, questions and deconstructs the very notion of identity, as there is nothing as 'one concrete identity' and that the identity that we speak about is subject to change.

Kapur's *The Immigrant* has very minimal characters unlike her other novels. The central character is Nina and the story unfolds with a description of her as a 30-year old single woman whose mother is obsessed with a need to find a suitable groom for her. Nina is educated, good looking and works as college lecturer. The story engages us with Nina's life, her marriage with Ananda, a NRI settled in Canada as a dentist. Nina goes to Canada after marriage as an immigrant and her journey of life in a new environment begins. She is not a constant negotiation with her life as a married woman and her adjustment to a new land. The story unfolds in how she adopts and adapts to a new culture with an initial fear and resistance to her new world. She gradually learns to assert individually and enjoys freedom. She sets aside age old practices and customs of a Hindu woman as tradition taught her an explores to find comfort in a new life style where there are no restrictions. This may be partially with her disappointment which nurtured her to self-realize and look forward to explore better possibilities.

Nina, Ananda, and his uncle symbolize facets of the Indian diasporic community in Kapur's narrative. Kapur's focus lies on the challenges encountered by Indian emigrants as they navigate new environments. Through the protagonist Nina, Kapur illuminates the complexities of life for a newlywed Indian woman. Themes of identity, displacement, racial discrimination, longing for one's homeland, cultural ambiguity, dual identity, and the pursuit of individuality are explored throughout the narrative as it unfolds through various episodes.

The clash between one's native culture and that of the adopted land engenders a dilemma regarding which perspective shapes one's worldview—either through the lens of colonizers or the teachings of native culture. Questions arise about identity and rootedness as factors such as clothing, physical

appearance, skin color, name, native language, accent, mannerisms, and dietary choices serve as markers of identity even in distant locations. The immigrant grapples with the dilemma of embracing or rejecting societal norms in the new culture, leading to a fluctuating identity suspended between two cultures, ultimately resulting in a dual identity.

Kapur in "The Immigrant" says...

"These immigrants live in two minds. Outway they Adjust well, Educated and English speaking, they allow misleading assumptions about a heart that is divided"(1).Despite possessing a valid passport and visa, Nina encounters racial discrimination at the Canadian airport"The immigration woman examines each page of her passport suspiciously. Nina's claimThat she has married a citizen needs to be scrutinized despite the paper work. The colour of her skin shouts volumes in that small room.She feels edgy; she is alone with a Woman who makes no eye contact, for whom she is less than human" (1).

Nina experiences a sense of displacement and a constant transition between two cultures—the colonizer and the colonized—while in Canada.

"For the first time in her life she felt out of place.

Wrong clothes, shoes, handbag, bag, May be in their

Eyes she was like the women sweeping."

(2).

There is this kind of resistance and acceptance of ideology. Kapur also highlights skin color as a significant immigrant concern. White skin is perceived as superior when compared to black or brown skin. Nina feels ashamed of her skin color, despite it being considered a prized fair complexion in India.

"I am the wrong colour; I came from the

Wrong place.....of all the passengers the only

One not allowed to sail through immigration,

Made to feel like an illegal alien"

(1)

The novels addressing immigrant themes often portray a prominent sense of loss. Immigrants commonly experience nostalgia, loneliness, compromise, and the need for adjustment. Nina's emotions parallel those of Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake." Ashima comes to realize that "being a foreigner is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden...."

Clothes reveal our identity, habit and personality. Detachment to traditional clothes and welcoming western wear gains modern women status. But women who move abroad change to clothing styles either out of compulsion or the sheer necessity of the environment. So an immigrant like Nina would need to shed her comfortable clothes and get into something which feels 'like being more exposed'. There is this transition, change and acceptance.

"As immigrants fly across oceans they shed their

Old clothing, because clothes make the man

And new ones help ease the transition."

(1)

A person's name is integral to their identity, reflecting aspects such as culture, tradition, religion, region, race, and gender. A name of a person speaks so many things, it is filled with meanings. A name of a person is also related to some God or some myths. In The Immigrant Ananda gets a psychological relief when he chooses himself called in a westernized name.

Nina enjoys complete freedom, liberated from the watchful eyes of family members, neighbors, and household staff. She is entirely independent and self-focused. This newfound freedom, coupled with a breakdown in traditional values, results in an extramarital affair, a transition from vegetarianism to consuming meat, and a disregard for societal norms and taboos. She wanted adventure and experience 'the road not taken'. She believed that there was no choice but to venture into new territories. She asserts 'when one is reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home' (1).

## CONCLUSION

Manju Kapur illustrates how trans-migrants navigating various cultures and locales find themselves caught between two worlds, both physically and psychologically. The displacements experienced are not limited to geography and culture but extend to spiritual realms as well. Immigrants gradually adopt Western ideals of privacy and independence. The theme of displacement and cultural identity takes center stage here. The themes and subjects examined by Manju Kapur are also investigated by other diasporic writers of Indian heritage, who similarly tackle similar issues. The probe into the text, gives an idea that in some way. Manju Kapur intends to deconstruct the concept of "indianess" as watertight category and calling into question anything related to it. May be there is an attempt to deconstruct east/west binary oppositions. All that we think and o is as per our mental makeup. Nothing remains as

permanent or fixed. There we see Nina, the protagonist heading towards new territories with a carefree vision. By delving into these underexplored areas, future research can offer a more comprehensive view of the immigrant experience as depicted in Kapur's work, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of cultural identity and the enduring quest for a sense of home in an ever-globalizing world. Kapur's *The Immigrant* thus stands not only as a significant literary work but also as a vital text for ongoing discussions about migration, identity, and belonging in contemporary society.

#### **Conflict of interests**

There are no conflicts of interest among authors.

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