



## Gender Issues and Feminine Concerns in Manju Kapur's Novel *The Immigrant*

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**Abstract:** *The present research paper attempts to explore gender issues and feminine concerns in Manu Kapur's fourth novel, The Immigrant through the portrayal of the women characters, especially that of Nina, who is a lecturer in English at Miranda House, Delhi University, living with her widowed mother in a rented flat at Jangpura, Delhi in the back-drop of globalisation and postcolonialism. Woman has been on the periphery of human society from the time immemorial; she has not been treated as an individual like his counterpart, Man, even though she has been the bedrock of the institution of family as a mother, as a sister and as a wife just because of her different biological make up, which, being devoid of muscle power, makes her feel somewhat vulnerable before a man in the scramble for social powers and which becomes a false reason for creating a social snare called 'gender' and manipulatively putting her into this categorised 'snare', hereof patriarchy is born. Ironically, a new and modern woman is still facing myriad challenges on her way to self-liberation and self-actualisation, even amid enormous educational, scientific, and technological advancements in the fast-changing dynamics of modern human society. The paper aims to analyse the gender issues and feminine concerns in the novel through the portrayal of the protagonist Nina and other women characters. Nina, from being a lecturer in English at Delhi University to moving to Canada to become a librarian at a university in Canada, sails through myriad hurdles just because she is an aspiring woman. She gets married to a Canada-based dentist, Ananda, through a marriage proposal brought by an astrologer, and departs for Canada to pursue a better future. But her journey from Delhi to Halifax in Canada is infested with untold miseries and plights: a harrowing experience of eking out a visa for Canada, living in a dysfunctional and treacherous marriage, going for an unjust affair with already a married man named Anton and getting raped by him, bidding an unwilling adieu to him and her husband to go her own way and settling down to a lowly profession of a librarian.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Feminine, Patriarchy, Globalisation and Postcolonialism

### Introduction

Manju Kapur has emerged as a novelist of international repute on the contemporary literary scene with a feminist streak, being an erstwhile professor of English at Delhi University. In this context, Jagdish Batra says: "A feminist to the core, Manju Kapur is known for challenging the traditional values in her writings". (Batra 13) She has authored six novels altogether: *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008), *Custody* (2011), and *Brothers: A Novel* (2016).

A woman has been portrayed as meek, coy and submissive in Indian fiction, as found in the novels of Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markanday, and the like. But now she has become a self-assertive, rebellious and modern woman in the novels of Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair, Gita Hariharan, Shobha De, Arundhati



Roy, etc. Today, the new woman can no longer be shackled by age-old, stale values and so-called morality; she does not like to dance to the tune of her chauvinistic male counterparts. Now she can go the extra mile to claim and gain her rights; she has her own voice; she is no longer dumb and mute. Now her body is not something to loathe. Rather, it has become a celebratory medium for creativity and writing poetry. In this regard, Hélène Cixous says in her *The Laugh of Medusa*: “Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. Our naphtha will spread throughout the world, without dollars – black or gold – non-assessed values that will change the rules of the old game” (Cixous 880). Advancements in all walks of life, including education, politics, science, and technology, have propelled an educated woman to assert herself, voice her inner urges, and break free of the bounds of domesticity. In this context, Betty Friedan comments: “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” (Friedan 51).

Feminism is a socio-political movement that emerged in the US in the 1960s, focused on advocating for women’s rights in a society that was largely patriarchal. The movement defies gender stereotypes and seeks to dismantle the structures that perpetuate inequality. Feminism has evolved through various waves: the first wave, the second wave, the third wave and the fourth wave. Some foundational texts include *Vindictive the Rights of Women* by Mary Wollstonecraft and *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir. And its various variants: Liberal Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Radical Feminism, Postcolonial Feminism, Black Feminism, Eco-feminism and Cyberfeminism have come into being to represent the different facets of women’s problems the world over through various perspectives.

### **Gender Issues and Feminine Concerns in *The Immigrant***

Manju Kapur’s fourth novel, *The Immigrant*, which has two settings: Delhi and Canada, captures the emergency period of the 1970s in India with the protagonist Nina, who happens to confront the various grim challenges coming her way whilst her journey to Canada, whilst her adaptation to its society and whilst living with her husband. One finds feminine concerns shown by the novelist in the portrayal of the four women characters: Nina, the protagonist, her mother, her friend Zenobia, and Ananda’s sister, Alka. The novelist paints Nina and her mother with greater sensitivity and subtlety; she delves deeper into their psyches through their traumas and predicaments. Zenobia and Alka are marginal female characters, serving as mere flat characters.

“Nina was almost thirty. Friends and colleagues consoled her by remarking on her radiant complexion and jet black hair, but such comfort was cold. Nina’s skin knew it was thirty, broadcasting the fact at certain angles in front of the mirror. Her spirit felt sixty as she walked from the bus stop to the single room where she lived with her mother. Her heart felt a hundred as it surveyed the many years of longing it had known”. (Kapur 1)

The novel *The Immigrant* unfolds into the above-written sentences with Nina’s bitter realisation that the possibilities of her getting married are becoming bleaker with each passing year, since her sagging skin silently tells her of this bitter fact in spite of herself. When her 30th birthday comes, her widowed mother becomes all the sadder, not finding a suitable match for Nina even though she holds a prestigious position as a lecturer in English at Miranda House, Delhi University.

Kapur tries to uncover the patriarchal mindset embedded in Indian society in the form of gender stereotypes; it comes to light when her mother herself goes to the local bus stop, being highly concerned about her security when Nina is late for home. Nina’s mother is worried about Nina’s



marriage all the time. However, she gets a sigh of relief when she finds a marriage proposal through an astrologer for Nina from a Canada-based dentist, Ananda, whose sister, Alka, then proceeds to arrange the marriage between Nina and Ananda. To Nina's and her mother's elation, the wedding takes place. After the wedding, Ananda returns to Canada, leaving Nina behind without a visa. A few days later, Nina starts struggling to arrange a visa for Canada, which proves an excruciating experience for her. However, she gets an immigrant visa and migrates to Canada, where her life partner, Ananda, works as a dentist, to live a fulfilling life of marital bliss, to seek better avenues, and to live a life free from all social constraints and taboos like other immigrants.

Ironically enough, all Nina's hopes and cherished dreams shatter bit by bit. Finding herself in an entirely alien land with almost everything weird and outlandish, she starts trying hard to adapt to this foreign land: graduating from sari to jeans and T-shirts and from vegetarian Indian food to eating beef even, living alone and lonely, finding nobody to share her feelings with, and waiting endlessly for Ananda, beguiling herself by reading books to ward off the day-long boredom and tedium. But even books fail to beguile her after a few days, even though she is a professor of English. She says, "Books bought from the grocery store fill her time. They are as cheap and trashy as the food she indulges in. Basically, she waits for Ananada to come home, then she will talk, often the first words of the day". (Kapur 122) Kapur seems to suggest that even a highly educated person, especially a woman, is first and foremost a human being. As a human being, every person has some bodily, emotional needs and urges, and he/she can have an emotionally fulfilled life only in the company of his/her loved human beings. It is quite easy to repress them, as most people do, but it is somewhat suicidal to do so because one does not remain happy in doing so. As for Nina, she is well aware of her needs and her inhibitions. However, she no longer wants to stay inhibited, being a new, modern woman. She wants to live a fulfilled life.

The novelist seeks to delve deeper into the plight and predicament a woman suffers in Indian social milieu just because of biases and prejudices associated with gender through the portrayal of Nina, even if she makes every possible sacrifice: Nina loses her prestigious job of lectureship; she migrates to a foreign country by leaving her old widowed mother lonely with no one to look after her; she tries her utmost to adapt to the alien land by switching on to quite a different way of dressing and eating, which she detests a lot; she keeps waiting for Ananda all day to come home just to talk to him by reading books whole day; staying in a dysfunctional marriage, undergoing a rape by a stranger. However, Nina does not earn happiness despite paying so many prices.

Kapur shifts her spotlight to the emptiness and the very façade in which the idea of a fulfilling family life through spouses' intimacy, by cooking the weekly dinner together, is enmeshed in the nuclear family in Western society. Ananda accompanies Nina in cooking to make her feel loved and overcome her loneliness and alienation, but it all goes in vain. Out of sheer desperation to fit in, she switches to meet-eating and wearing Western clothes, but again, she fails miserably. Here, Kapur tries to foreground the fragmented family life of the immigrants in the Western world.

The depiction of gender issues by Kapur in the novel is allied to deep-rooted patriarchy working through ideologies, conventions and tradition, which Loïse Althusser calls *interpellation*. Nina's mother is shown as a weak lady because ideologies and traditions have interpellated her. She is consumed by her excessive concern about Nina's wedding because of her interpellation. She does not realise that by being well-educated, Nina can live her life unwed. And she cannot fend for herself emotionally, even though she assures Nina, saying, "Don't



worry about me, beta. I will be all right. If need be, I can go back to Lucknow.” (Kapur 101) at the time when Nina goes to Canada, having been married to Ananda. On the other hand, Zenobia is the boldest character, though a minor one. She may seem freakish, but in fact, she renders a blow to the shams and stale traditions, which act as a stranglehold for women. She is described by the novelist as “abandoned by marriage after six years, but with parental money and with an autonomous flat”. Her attitude toward marriage was one of “been there, done that”. Her life was now filled with relatives, nieces and good friends, occasional sexual encounters and a passion for teaching. She often urged Nina to go abroad for higher education that might prove for her only chance of finding a worthy guy, for Indian men were mother-obsessed, infantile, chauvinist bastards. This little description of her personality traits suffices to tell one what kind of woman she is.

As soon as Nina comes to Canada to live with her husband, Ananda, by adopting and adapting to everything with high hopes in her bosom, the problems of her dysfunctional marriage start surfacing. Ananda suffers from premature ejaculation, which is a sexual dysfunction and which makes his marital life troublesome. Consequently, Nina becomes the worst victim of this marital malaise, to which Ananda remains indifferent--- which frustrates her even more. Once, she does mention this issue to him to fix it, but he turns a deaf ear to it. Growing extremely impatient and frustrated, she calls Sue to share her frustration of childlessness by visiting her. Nina does see her and relates her tragic tale to her, emotionally breaking down in the process. And thanks to her, she comes in contact with La Leche League, an association of nursing mothers, some of whom are suffering from the trouble of conceiving; from this, she gets some bits of advice and emotional support, which propel her to face her problem head-on, and confront her husband over the issue of pregnancy. However, when she mentions her visit to Sue regarding the issue of childlessness, Ananda’s look of satisfaction turns into rage and bewilderment. Becoming furious with Nina, Anand thinks that it is stupid to fuss over the arrival of a child before settling down in life first. He rages, saying: “To get pregnant as soon as you married was a very stupid, backward thing to do; it was more important to settle down first” (Kapur 167).

Manju Kapur seeks to locate the root cause of Nina’s predicament, which lies, in fact, not in childlessness but in her sexually dysfunctional marriage owing to Ananda’s premature ejaculation. Nina is a woman first; above all, she is an educated new woman, she knows the worth of her instinctive body full well, and she also knows that “blood is wiser than intellect”. Nina does not like to live an inhibited life like her mother; instead, she longs to live a fulfilling life filled with myriad colours--- both of emotions and intellect. Kapur, through the plight of Nina, seeks to highlight the pathetic condition the likes of Nina are enmeshed in; they seem to be living superficially glamorous lives, but in fact, they are deeply disgruntled and frustrated deep down. Nina lives an empty and insipid life, shorn of the fulfilment brought in by love and sex, although she lives in a so-called glamorous world. Indeed, her life represents all the women who are suffering from sexual deprivation and inhibition.

Nina hungers for fulfilment and warmth in her personal life, which she badly misses in her dysfunctional marital life. In a bid to live a fulfilled life, she falls into an extramarital affair with Anton, a New Yorker who happens to be a fellow student studying library science in the same college where Nina studies. It is not that she willingly goes for this illicit affair with Anton, who is already married, has a flippant attitude towards a relationship; he just wants to have some flings away from his wife, thinking that everything is fair until it remains concealed and unknown. It is just that after being deceived and disgruntled by her husband Anand, when she discovers that her husband has an affair with a Canadian girl called Mandy, Nina falls an





easy prey to this lusty tyrant, who happens to even rape her when she refuses to have sex with him, discovering that Anton is not serious about their affair. In this regard, Mary Wollstonecraft comments on the violence of men's lust, "The sensualist, indeed, has been the most dangerous of tyrants and women have been duped by their lover, as princes by their ministers, whilst dreaming that they reigned over them". (Wollstonecraft 22). Here, Kapur tries to imply that a woman hardly finds love in an extramarital affair; on the contrary, she is often duped by her lover, and she remains a prey to his mere carnal passion, being trapped in the illusion of love. At the same time, she foregrounds the very flippancy and flimsiness embedded in the man-woman relationship in the so-called advanced Western world, highlighting the fact that age-old patriarchy and male chauvinism are at the root of the West's flippant attitude towards the man-woman relationship.

Nina, deceived and disgruntled by both Ananda and Anton, decides to go into the unknown world, being liberated and enlightened, without retaliating and without creating any fuss. She simply sneaks away from her home without letting her husband know about her decision to go away from him, and the very treachery committed by him. Finding herself as "a floating resident of the Western world" (Kapur 330), she reincarnates herself with a newfound outlook on life, and then she plunges into the unknown world, thinking, "When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull your shallow roots and move. Find a new place, new friends, a new family. It had been possible once. It would be possible again" (Kapur 330). Here, Kapur carves out a new modern woman who is assertive and bold enough to surge ahead into the world with new hopes and with new possibilities by braving the thorny ways of the world, being emboldened rather than demoralised and disheartened.

## Conclusion

To sum up, gender issues are traced back to the age-old patriarchy embedded in Indian society. The very demarcation of two sexes into genders based on biological differences is manipulative. A man always acts as a referent to a woman for her significant existence in this male chauvinistic world, and a woman has to play a subservient role within the home and outside the home. However, Nina braves this male-chauvinistic world not only through her courage but also through wisdom, not by retaliating but by stealthily walking away from home, which is emotionally no longer hers when she discovers that her husband Ananda is in an illicit relationship with Mandy. She goes into the unknown world without bothering about what will betide to her rather than staying in a treacherous and demeaning conjugal relationship. Kapur captures the flux of times in the contemporary world, and she, in a way, seeks to convey that women's empowerment seasoned with modern education has started defying and dismantling age-old patriarchy.

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