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Parting of the Ways and Charting New Paths: The Woman at the Crossroads in Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*

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Abstract

Through fictional renderings, writers have elaborated upon the very factual and often difficult aspects of living in a country other than one's own. Such narratives trace identity negotiations and reveal that the final reckoning that the protagonist, especially a woman has with herself, are not one ultimate construal, but a continuous renewal. Placed at certain critical crossroads, she charts out different paths towards her agency. *The Immigrant* by Manju Kapur is one such work that brings to the fore how reactions to control, support, defiance or acquiescing differ from person to person, between genders, and *within* relationships. This paper addresses certain aspects, especially those relating to adaption and isolation, of these interactions. It examines the endeavours of Nina, the protagonist of *The Immigrant*, as she grapples with cultural differences not only in a foreign society, but also with dissimilar attitudes and power equations at home, with an Indian-born spouse.

Keywords

Immigration; Relationships; Manju Kapur; Cultural Differences; Identity Negotiations; *The Immigrant*.

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Culture - to - culture interactions churn out potent concoctions, blending linguistic differences and similarities, class categories, religious beliefs, social statuses, gender biases, and a multitude of facets that make up people and their environments. Invariably, the effects of these exchanges unearth an altered society, one encompassing within it strains of multiculturalism, xenophobia, integration, acculturation, stereotyping, openness, nationalism, and exploitation. Even tourists feel the impact of the experience, both positive as well as negative, despite the temporary nature of their sojourn abroad. One affect is the ‘Paris Syndrome’ about which the BBC reports, “A dozen or so Japanese tourists a year have to be repatriated from the French capital, after falling prey to what’s become known as ‘Paris syndrome’”(Wyatt). As the example of the Japanese travellers illustrates¹, no one can walk away unaffected after having come into direct contact with a foreign society.

For immigrant couples, the different backgrounds of their life in their homeland also lead to different expectations from their newfound lives abroad. Then, the reasons that compel people to migrate often determine the way they integrate into the new society. On a personal level, the tension between the old and the new also become sites of personal negotiations *within* the individual. William Safran notes that the notion of diaspora also suggests the notion of “polycentrism”. It is “the notion of at least two centres of ethnonational culture; the homeland and the diaspora” (76). In *The Immigrant*, Ananda, the young dentist returns briefly to India to meet the woman he hoped to marry. He had

¹ Based on media-hyped jargons, the Japanese tourist romantically envisages the Parisians as embodiments of refinement and elegance. However, the Japanese, known for their courteous demeanour are taken aback by the apparent rudeness of some Parisians. They return from their trip in a depressed state of mind and seek medical help.

had a different reason for migrating to Canada. When in India, he had lost his parents in a fatal car accident – a loss he bore heavily. Secondly, the political atmosphere in his country with forced sterilization of men to control population and the authoritarian attitude of the ruling political party made the place a forbidding one and did little to encourage an ambitious young man who began to feel that “there was nothing in this country” (17). He had thus decided to move to Canada in search of a better life, with very little to hold him back. Nina, on the other hand, relocates because she accepts his marriage proposal as she was 30 years old and was uncomfortable being still single. Societal pressures as well her own wish to settle down prompt her into making a big leap into the unknown. However, despite her personal unhappy experiences in her native land, Nina is not as disgruntled with the country as Ananda is. Thus, their attitudes towards integration into the Canadian society also differ and these invariably affect their mutual interactions *within* the confines of their home.

Untied Family Ties

In *The Immigrant*, a tug of war of cultures is occurring on another level between Ananda’s Indian uncle and his Canadian wife. The uncle strains to maintain some of the ways he has grown up with, like housing a just-landed young relative. Conversely, his wife Nancy resists this by conceding to the set-up, yet simultaneously creating an atmosphere of *forced* hospitality. Based on his cultural background, the uncle kindly offers to care for Ananda, his sister’s son, thus tied to him by blood. Nancy, his Canadian wife exhibits a resistance to this ‘Easternization’ of her household. Unable to reject in an outright manner this relative’s access into *her* domain, her home, she first sets up a room in the basement, to create a physical distance between her family and the boarder. Secondly, she widens the emotional chasm by insinuating how her children were independent at a much earlier age. Ananda, an educated young man, feels insulted by her comments. No additional concessions are made for this bewildered young man who had recently lost his parents and had just arrived

from a different society. On his very first night in their home, he experiences utter loneliness:

Three o' clock found him rambling in a strange house, too scared to make a noise that might disturb, longing for a cup of tea. . . He was alone, all alone, with relatives who did not wake with the fall of his feet on the floor, the blood that joined them diluted with the waters of an ocean. The glossy magazine house felt cold and alien. Tears gathered and fell silently as he sat huddled on the soft yellow silk love seat, shivering with grief and cold in his new pyjamas. (19)

Thus, the Nancy household becomes the site of a silent, unacknowledged dispute of conflicting cultural beliefs where the man and the woman are striving to gain a commandeering position.

Later, during their very first dinner together, Nina immediately senses the total “self-absorption” of the family. Nancy’s jabs about having Ananda under their roof for so long, the fine silver they owned, and little interest in Nina, are all deliberate. Nina thinks how the uncle’s family simply saw her as “Ananda’s wife, as his responsibility, a vegetarian, who needed to acquire the food habits of the West . . .” (134-35). Nina experiences a ‘culture shock’ when she finds that the uncle does not contact them often. She is disturbed by this distancing between the only ‘family’ they had in Canada. As evidenced by studies in the field, the very concept of self-development varies from culture to culture. One such example is what Hazel R. Markus and Shinobu Kitayama term “independence” and “interdependence” models of forming one’s definition of ‘self’. Their work shows how the American view, where independence “attending to the self, the appreciation of one’s difference from others, and the importance of asserting the self”, differs greatly from Asian attitudes. They state, “The Japanese examples emphasize attending to and fitting in with others and the importance of harmonious interdependence with them” (224). They examine and compare the “independent view of the self with one other, very different view, an

interdependent view”, and note that the former is most clearly exemplified in some sizable segment of American culture, as well as in many Western European cultures”, while the latter is “exemplified in Japanese culture as well as in other Asian cultures” (225).

Thus, Nina experiences disappointment because her definition of family and support, and self-development is at variance with Nancy’s.

Nina’s Development: Isolation, Confrontation, and Support

“Till Nina came to Canada she hadn’t known what lonely meant” (159). The loneliness she had felt in India was more of “romantic companionate loneliness.” This emptiness in the West belonged to the category of “the soul destroying absence of human beings from her life”.

Upon arriving in the West, the first thing that strikes the immigrant from the East is the dearth of human contact and the absence of sounds. Used to commotion and perpetual motion, the almost- deafening silence and stillness seems to grate on their senses. After arriving in Halifax, Nina struggles with the quietness surrounding her, “It was strange to have no sign of any living thing around her. When was Ananda coming home?” (115). And Nina will discover that the formalities behind organizing get-togethers are strenuous to the Easterner used to casually dropping-in unannounced at a friend’s or a neighbour’s. Tightly bound by time and Do-It-Yourself chores to complete, Western etiquette frowns upon unexpected visits. Salman Akhtar talks about “the subjective experience of time”. He observes that “. . . in industrialized nations time was gradually rendered into a commodity, while in non-industrialized nations it was not”. Due to this industrialization that was dependent on time and the returns it generated, a capital-based concept of time developed. He states - “Thus was born what I call the “time of the mind” or “time of money” (Akhtar 11). Nina finds herself struggling as she attempts to come to terms with the difference in personal and social time arrangements in her new surroundings.

However, Ananda seems to be operating through another mode of assimilating into Canadian society, that of integrating by deliberately discounting his original background. Akhtar elaborates, “By rapidly and fully taking on the dictates of the adopted country, the immigrant seems to be declaring that no discontinuity exists between his prior and current norms of thinking, language, food and attire and behaviour” (Akhtar 13). When Nina first lands in Halifax, she greets her husband recounting the humiliating incident at the immigration desk with an expectation of support and understanding – from one Indian to another, and she trusts that he would indeed “share the knowledge and the shame” (108). Ananda’s response, a patronising “Calm down. . . This is standard”, reveals the extent to which he identifies himself as an integrated immigrant; now a Canadian; a man with the mindset of the West; wishing to distance himself from the interactions, even those discriminatory in nature commonly encountered by his compatriots, as those issues did not concern him anymore. His ‘Them and Me’ stance, with the former standing for the Third World and the latter for himself, is obvious in his response to the incident that has traumatised his new-arrived wife. Often, he would condescendingly comment on the ways of fellow Indians settled in Canada. His attitude appears to be an example of the “discriminating marginality” that Mahalingam details in his study of immigrants. He notes:

There may be two different kinds of marginality: discriminating and empowering marginality. Discriminating marginality refers to the process by which marginalized group members psychologically distance themselves from other marginalized groups by identifying themselves with the dominant group. Empowering marginality refers to the process where in marginalized group members form coalitions through critical awareness about the commonalities of their marginalized social experience. (162)

Cultural identity to Ananda means being accepted by the Canadian circle he is in, notably his friend and now-colleague Gary's family, and be taken for a sophisticated and westernized man. This eagerness for integration makes him doubly conscious about his Indian background, associating it with awkwardness and traditional. Becoming a non-vegetarian is also something he does with relative ease.

Conversely, Nina deals with her immigrant status differently. She appears to address her surroundings from a more confident platform. A non-conformist, at home in India, she had not jumped at the very first offer of marriage and used to view her mother's insistence on horoscope-based matches cynically but went along only to humour her. Even her acceptance of Ananda's marriage proposal was based on an unromantic attitude towards the union, rejecting dreamy illusions because "she had to live in the real world" (73). She agrees to what appears to be a decent offer from a well-mannered man from a respectable family. Next, as an educated woman with a legal right to join her husband, Nina squirms under the interrogation she is subjected to at the airport, put in a "small empty cubicle with neon lights, and no windows" (105) for interrogation. "Rage fills her. Why were people so silent about the humiliations they faced in the West?" she asks herself. After being allowed to enter the country, she is still unable to overcome the feeling of discrimination. Nina is a confident woman and her personality is shaped by being quite at ease with who she is. Ananda, however, is driven by a desire to be recognized and accepted. This leads him to be an image-conscious individual, eager to dispel the stereotypical notion of the awkward Easterner who did not quite fit in western societies. This is rather evident in several parts of the narrative. Once, on their drive back home from a party meeting Gary's family, Nina's thoughts were languidly focussed on returning home and having tea, while Ananda's thoughts "darted obsessively back to the party, worrying, assessing" (147). Additionally, Ananda's keenness to appear more integrated, more Western and less Indian, makes him reticent to

clear any false impressions about India, whereas Nina confidently and unapologetically attempts to explain certain positive aspects of Indian ways. When asked about marriages in India, Ananda had preferred to accept that that was the way the West looked upon arranged marriages, “. . . barbarically arranged, . . . strangers were forced to cohabit . . .”(83), conceding there was not much he could do about it, thinking it was “Useless to assert the influence of modernity, to suggest variations . . .” (84). However, despite the societal pressures she was subjected to because of her un-married status during her youth in India, Nina describes to her Canadian listeners, the meaning of what generally constitutes ‘arranged marriage’ with rational and lucid explanations. As a woman with a discerning mind, she has the capacity to evaluate societal mores. In matrimonial affairs, she had been through the rigmarole of astrologers and earlier trying to find true love in a man she liked. She can dismiss the authenticity of astrological predictions and tell her mother she does not really accept their veracity, and yet is able to present a clearer picture to Canadians about arranged marriages in India. She is able to discern the positive from the negative and in doing so, presents an individual self who is free both from the tyranny of a ‘victimhood’ status and from positioning herself as the glorifier of her culture’s traditions. Uma Narayan states, “Surely, respecting . . . one’s own culture . . . should not mean, respecting or endorsing *every element* of its traditions, values, and practices”. Narayan adds, “After all, the term “respect” has roots in the notions of “looking back” at” and “considering” – terms that suggest appraisal and evaluation, not simple acceptance or deference” (Narayan, 134). In the course of her interactions with Canadians, Nina tries to do just that. She discusses the problems Western women might have because of the pressure of finding a suitable partner. She points out to Beth from the woman’s group how the need to appear attractive at all times does not haunt Eastern women as it does for Western ones. She explains “. . . the compulsion to attract male attention is not there. . . . at home nobody talks of being too fat, or thin” (220).

She is thus capable of independently foregrounding certain insecurities that affect Western women; insecurities borne out of the specificities of their culture. She tells Beth that the cult of youth and beauty has its stronghold on western women. Nina attempts to dispel, in the course of her interactions with Canadians, any superior attitudes and labelling as inferior Indian practices, especially when differences exist within these practices and the nuances offer different results.

Again, Ananda is so overzealous about assimilating that he asks Nina to use his westernized name. Nina objects to this unnecessary pervasion of assimilation and declines to address Ananda by the name he wanted her to use “Andy”. She holds her ground: “It was foreign, Christian, Western, and to use the word Andy in her own home would be to carry alienation into the bedroom” (153).

i) Isolation

Nina evidently begins to suffer from loneliness and finds herself in a depressed state. “Nina cries, feels homesick, sometimes adventurous, often forlorn”. Waiting all day in the apartment Nina hears the silence. “Basically she waits for Ananda to come home, then she will talk, often the first words of the day” (122).

The first signs of loneliness appear in Nina’s life when she realises that people in the West hardly meet or interact on a casual basis and tend to organize even informal social events much in advance. Birthdays, unlike in India, Ananda informs, were “. . . not a family function” and did not include other relatives. Nina quizzes Ananda about the lack of contact he has with his uncle’s family and he gloats how lucky they were to have the uncle’s house to go to “on holidays” (159) like Thanksgiving and Christmas.

ii) Confrontation

Soon, the problems between Ananda and Nina become intense and the imbalanced power dynamics between the man and the woman become more

apparent in the exchanges between husband and wife. Additionally, financial dependence on Ananda brings with it numerous hindrances. He is disturbed when she shops for new clothes, and often earnestly calculates before venturing into any expenditure. Soon, it becomes a tool of control through insinuations about her passive role in contributing financially. He says “. . . while you sit around and relax at home, I am at the clinic working hard to make a living” (178).

Each time Nina brings up their marital problems, especially their intimate ones, Ananda becomes bad-tempered and resorts to silence, to *silence* Nina. As she nudges him about the topic his reply is, “Will you shut up about doctors?” (178). Ananda’s particular physical issues compound his self-centredness. He had problems performing sexually from the very first encounter. He was a man who had wished to marry a white woman, which would be like, “. . . marrying the country with your whole body” (44), but knew he would not be able to meet their expectations. He had thus married Nina to build his confidence. Having achieved that, he had become unfaithful to her, and now “he wanted to test himself in a wider arena” (201). Nina notices his tendency of treating her like a laboratory test and protests. These confrontations trigger the disintegration of their marriage.

iii) Support

Nina first seeks comfort in literature and turns to the familiar pursuit of reading, “. . . to fill the spaces in her mind . . .” (120). Then, Nina enrolls in a higher studies program that will make her self-sufficient. As confrontations increase, and angered by his hypocritical lectures on “sharing” when he had been doing the very opposite, she announces, “I need to find my feet in this country. I can’t walk on yours” (213). When she joins the woman’s group, Ananda’s reaction is chauvinistic. Suspicious of such “bra burning feminists”, as he puts it, he patronisingly tells her, “She had to choose the best from the West, not blindly follow any and everybody”(213).

Thus, it is important to note that when Nina begins to experience greater isolation, the support she gets comes from women: the Canadian woman Sue; then a mothers' group 'La Leche League', and eventually the women's group who discuss their problems. The importance of such support groups cannot be underestimated, especially in immigrant contexts. The role of female solidarity in these circumstances becomes paramount in guiding these bewildered women. The sufferings of these women ranges from simpler problems such as lack of female friends to major issues like mental isolation due to non-communicative partners, severe mental and physical abuse; threats to their lives and so on.

Thus, the narrative reveals the protagonist's search through her journeys. It shows the immigrant woman; upon wishing to root herself in a new land also unearths her own inner strengths. Ananda and Nina, are both Indians, both diasporic individuals, but their reactions to their environment are not homogeneous. Gender, former backgrounds and present expectations influence their identity negotiations with others, and with each other. Ananda sees financial success, the material comforts that come with it and the securing of a wife as three concrete evidences of strengthening his position and in putting down his roots. Once the three essentials have been taken care of, he lets his wife know his standpoint on integration and marriage and expects she would wholeheartedly abide by his version. However, Nina refuses to submit. The discovery of a lock of blond hair on their bed changes Nina's life. The errant strand reveals her errant husband's betrayals, and this one took place while she was away in India for her mother's funeral. She makes a decision to leave and accepts a job offer in another city in Canada. They come to a parting of the ways. For Nina, there was "no going back" (330), but charting a new path was.

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