Alienation and Quest for Identity in Manju Kapur’s ‘The Immigrant’

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Abstract:
‘The Immigrant’ by Manju Kapur relates the story of an Indian couple-- Nina and Ananda, exploring the issues of alienation and the quest for identity and the issues that surround their arranged marriage, and Nina and Ananda’s transformation through becoming the immigrant. Predominantly based on the concept migration through an arranged marriage, it discusses common themes of alienation, dislocation of Indian culture, diaspora and quest for identity .The present paper aims at exploring the issues of alienation and the quest for identity. In fact the issues of patriarchy and changing transnational lives among immigrants are often stereotypical in such fiction, as noted in this paper. India was suffering its post-independence growth pangs, and in the west gender roles and attitudes. The Immigrant is ultimately about the alienated character like Nina. It reflects the loneliness and the search of self being focused on the world at large. In this regard, the emotional fulfillment that male like Ananda has a few sexuality issues of his own to contend with the theme of alienation. However, The Immigrant does confirm the realities lived by immigrants, and in this case, immigrant Indian women. The novel gives an insight about the inner conflict and the loneliness that creates certain amount of impact on personal identity.

Keywords: Alienation, Quest for Identity, Dislocation of Culture, Inner Conflict, Migration

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The present paper aims at exploring the Alienation and Quest for Identity in Manju Kapur’s novel ‘The Immigrant’ (2008) which fosters the theme of alienation and dislocation of Indian culture in the context of globalization with the panorama and twist of East and West culture. The beginning of the novel the poses the identity issues of the immigrants by the narrator such as, ‘Should the immigrant attempt to integrate and be more like the people in his or her adopted country or keep at preserving his / her cultures and traditions in a threat of the surroundings that smothers it?’ It is related to the questions of the alienated immigrants and their quest for the identity.

The prominent figure Nina struggles to encompass her identity and found in the clash between the two cultures in the novel. Nina as an English teacher at Miranda House, New Delhi, lives in a one room apartment with her widowed Indian mind-set mother. The story begins just before Nina’s thirtieth birthday by immediately pondering into the issue of her being unmarried and thirty. Nina has had many opportunities where her mother has tried to find prospective suitors to marry her, but of no avail. To quell her mother’s constant obsession with Nina’s impending marriage, mother and daughter consult with an astrologer as to when Nina will marry. Her mother considers her as a burden, a liability, a responsibility to get her married off. When a marriage proposal comes for Nina from an
NRI, Ananda, a dentist by profession settled in Canada. Nina’s mother’s happiness knew no bounds and she prayed for the proposal to materialize. After the marriage of Nina with Anand, she departs to Canada with her husband and she faces the problems to cope with the western culture and her struggles begin with the traditional way of living in India and about an adjustment in the living style in Canada.

Ananda begins to stay in Canada before his marriage with Nina. Ananda and Nina gradually convert from the strict vegetarianism of their upbringing to an omnivorous diet, and Nina finds herself doing the same with clothing, feeling unable to wear her saris and eventually graduating from salwar kameez to Western dress. Nina finally succumbed to the picture Ananda presented to her of her life abroad. "Then Ananda promised her such a future, laced with choices, edged with beautiful snowflakes that glittered through the distance, promising at the very minimum change, novelty, excitement"(Kapur 2008:78). She becomes overjoyed "to join legions of women who crossed the seas to marry men living in unseen lands (Kapur 2008:78). In the nineteenth century it was the Northerners to leave their homelands for Asia.

Nina is financially self-reliant yet the typical man needed a bride who would surround him with familiar traditions, habits and attitudes, whose reward was the prosperity of the West and a freedom often not available to her at home’ (Kapur2008:78). It is mirrored the kind of patriarchal attitude of the Indian society from the perspectives of Anand’s marriage with Nina. Her intension of the arranged marriage eventually fulfilled and a gradual crisis of identity started between the couple. Arguments, blame, guilt, indifference and ultimately infidelity all ensue to create a much different atmosphere within their marriage than that of the beginning.

Although the novel is divided into two parts, Nina’s life thematically divides the story. The first half where she holds on to her Indian identity, values and customs; and the second half where Nina returns to school for postgraduate studies at the local University and in doing so, after much finding of ‘feet’ gradually finds her own independence and identity in Canada (Kapur 2008: 121).The immigrants are always in the twist of the two cultures which is followed by the attempts to adjust or engross, either to be known by a separate identity as a racial group or be assimilated.

The communication between Ananda and Nina portrays a kind of the search for self when Nina firms her feet to be independent and before having a child, she wishes to settle herself and says, ‘I miss home- I miss a job- I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?’(Kapur 2008:237) She doesn’t keep herself vibrant in communication with Ananda and believes in the advice of other women. Manju Kapur explains her state of mind as, ‘He didn’t understand what was so special about her feet. Immigrants had to find their way, of course, but instead of following his advice, she preferred to go to some women for help. He hoped their child would make the family more whole, give them all a greater sense of belonging.’(Kapur 2008:236)

Ananda and Nina are in the quest of the harmonious coexistence in the married life but bound together by their overlapping loneliness. Nina finds herself alienated when her husband is out at work she sleeps, reads or shops for sugar-rich junk food. Kapur writes that ‘In marriage, the power of shopping together cannot be underestimated. Planning the week’s menu suggests a stronger future than sex ever can.’ (Kapur 2008:181) She is completely dislocated from the Indian culture and finds herself engaged in the Library work later. Ananda is professionally successful, and develops
rapport with a small number of intimate friends beyond the circle of his relatives, but he is captivated by alienation which is focused on his sense of sexual inadequacy. He fails to develop good relationship with the Western women. He has tried and failed to have relations with Western women. Christopher Lasch points that ‘identity refers both to persons and to things. ‘Both have lost their solidity in modern society, their definiteness and continuity’. (Lasch1979: 32)

Nina comes across with the problems of self respect and deprived from the sexual satisfaction as Ananda suffers from the premature ejaculation. With respect to women’s identities, Clifford makes an important point on how the process of self respect influences the role of women. He discusses how women, while still attached to a “home” culture often find themselves caught between “patriarchies, ambiguous pasts, and futures” and how communities can be a site of support for women, but also of oppression(Clifford 1994:314).She can’t share her feelings about the marital life and she is alienated from convincing outlook. Before marriage she was identified as lecturer but things are different in Canada. She is no more a lecturer; she is identified as Nina Sharma and not by her individuality. Sue, suggests her to come out of her non-working and disrespectful status and encourages her to join two year Library Science Course. But this economic independence introduces Nina to many other inner conflicts Apart from the migration issues, the couple's family life, culture and marital loyalty is challenged in an alienated place. Indians are known to value their morals and ethics but their attitude changes when they are in foreign land. Nina is alienated and dislocated from the Indian culture and finds puzzled in the quest for identity as Kapur writes; ‘At present all she is, is a wife, and a wife is alone for many hours’. ‘There will come a day when even books are powerless to distract. When the house and its convenience can no longer completely charm and compensate.’ ‘Then she realises she is an immigrant for life.’ (Kapur 2008:122)

Nina feels thinks about India and it often makes her think about her ‘immigrant’ identity. Kapur poses the attachment of Nina for her own country when she hears a radio report of the KumbhMela, She finds herself ‘as much a stranger to as anyone in Canada ... she had never had anything to do with ritual Hinduism’ (Kapur 2008:175). Anand’s musical tastes are Western –Beethoven’s Fifth is one of his favorites; Nina is a voracious reader. It shows her interest in the east and west relationship as well as the psychological relationship between married couple by reading D.H. Laurence and E.M. Forster. She tries to mirror herself gripped in the psychological twist and chaos through the European writings. Nina finds no way to free from the alienation and in the context; she says that ‘certain Indians become immigrants slowly. They are not among those who have fled persecution, destitution, famine, slavery and death threats, nor among those for whom the doors of their country slam shut the minute they leave its borders.’ (Kapur2008:120)

The quest of identity for Nina continues till the end of the story. Nina prepares for a job interview at the University of New Brunswick, and it is uncertain if she will return to her Halifax life or not. It feels, though, as if she is now ready to take control of her own destiny – ‘heading towards fresh territories, a different set of circumstances ... When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home.’ Pull your shallow roots and move. Find a new place, a new friends, a new family. It had been possible once, it would be possible again.’ (Kapur 2008:330). The confusion of Nina goes on and the formation of the stability for immigrant people like
Nina suffers from the alienation and the quest for identity in shaping individual identity.

**Conclusion**

The Indian immigrants come across with the identity problems and the alienation by different languages, customs, cultures, traditions, values and attitudes. The amalgam of East and West values make the people alienated when they suffer from the inner conflicts like Ananda and Nina. The clash between Indian culture and Western influence results into the psychological dilemma for the people. As a result, the acute psychological study of the quest for identity and alienation becomes significant in the context of the issues of the immigrants.

**References:-**

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