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## A Subaltern Study of Manju Kapur's The Immigrant

**Dr. Saba Parveen**

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Dayanand Girls P. G. College, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh

**Abstract:** *This paper critically examines Manju Kapur's novel The Immigrant through a subaltern perspective. A subaltern is someone with a low ranking in a social, political and other hierarchy and a subaltern study is the study of the psyche of those who have been suppressed and marginalized for so long. Manju Kapur, the most prominent and popular contemporary writer of Indian English Literature deals with various themes such as diaspora, feminism, cross cultural experiences, identity crisis, lesbianism etc. in her novels. Though she hates to be called a feminist writer, her novels are flooded with feminist concerns. The novel understudy is the story of a 31 year old spinster Nina who lived with her widowed mother in Delhi. She is a teacher at Miranda House. She gets married to an NRI Dentist Ananda and flies to Canada to add a new chapter in her life. Throughout the novel she is portrayed as a victim of Indian patriarchal culture struggling hard to establish her identity in a hostile modern world. The present paper is an endeavor to explore Nina as a subaltern female character searching for her identity in a host country. It also aims at showing how Nina tries her best to maintain harmony at home but when she feels cheated and suffocated, she doesn't hesitate to walk out of the male dominated world.*

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Subaltern, Gender Roles, Marriage, Marginalized and Transgression.

Since the inception of human beings, women have always been considered as the 'other', someone who lives on the periphery. Their place and position in society is defined by the various frameworks of patriarchal domination. Their freedom is limited within four walls of their home. They are so physically and psychologically oppressed that they are unable to share their thoughts and feelings even if they are given a chance to speak. They do not have a voice of their own. Based on this assumption of inferior position, women are called the subalterns. The literal meaning of subaltern is someone of inferior rank and in postcolonial studies it is used as a synonym for the subordinate roles of women in male dominating patriarchal society. The term 'subaltern' was first introduced by Antonio Gramsci in his article "Notes on Italian History" and later on it was added to his widely famous book *Prison Notebooks* that was written between 1929 and 1930. He used the term "to refer to those groups in a society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes[...] they have less access to the means by which they may control their own representation, and less access to cultural and social institutions." (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 314-315) Gramsci's intention was to make their subdued voice and culture heard as they were subsequently absent from the historical narrative of the dominant ruling classes. Fascinated by Gramsci's idea of subaltern, a group of 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars working on Indian peasantry historiography expanded the definition of subaltern. This Subaltern Studies Group includes Ranjit Guha along with other South Asian historians, critics and scholars like Touraj Atabaki, Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardyman, Gyan Pandey and Sumit Sarkar who intended to promote systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian studies. Ranjit Guha opines that the term is used in subaltern studies "as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and

office or in any other way.” (Guha 35) Later on Indian American post colonial theorist and critic Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak came up with her own concept of subaltern in her groundbreaking essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” That has led to more theoretical complexity. She linked the idea of subaltern with that of a gendered category where she argued:

“The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of sexual division of labor, for both of which there is “evidence”; rather, both were used as object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, though the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If in the concept of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.” ( Spivak, 28)

She further elaborated that women are doubly effaced by combining force of patriarchal domination and colonialism. They do not have an identity of their own. Their place and position in society is always defined on familial terms. Their identity is inferred from the relationship to the clearly gendered categories of being a mother, a daughter, and a wife.

Manju Kapur is the most popular and prominent contemporary writer of Indian writing in English. She is a mirror of the society kind of writer. Her books reflect what she sees in the society. She is known for her depiction of real world experiences of women. She used fiction as a medium to portray the struggles of an urban woman to find an equal status and identity for herself in the family as well as in the society. Kapur, through her novels showcases the transformation of a woman from a subaltern, silent and subjugated woman to an empowered, independent and assertive one who does not even hesitate to go against the patriarchal norms. The present novel under study *The Immigrant* is the fourth novel of Manju Kapur. It was shortlisted for The India Plaza Golden Quill Award and the DSC Prize of South Asian Literature in 2010. The protagonist is Nina who lives with her mother in New Delhi and works as a teacher in Delhi’s one of the most prestigious colleges, Miranda house. Despite having a place and position in society she belongs to the category of subaltern due to her marital status. This paper aims to show the struggle of a subaltern woman who has to face double discrimination from her home as well as her homeland. She is the victim of both patriarchy and colonialism. It is also an endeavour to showcase the changed face of subalternity in which a woman does not hesitate to break the shackles of family ties in order to establish her identity as an individual.

The Immigrant is the story of an Indian married couple, Ananda and Nina and the issues that surround their married life. The novel is based on the theme of a woman’s struggle to possess an identity of her own, the kind of discrimination she faces in an alien land. After migration, a woman gets doubly displaced from their home as well as homeland. This displacement sometimes helps them to acquire more liberty but this can also make them more vulnerable. Dr. Beena Agrawal writes, “On one hand the phenomenon of migration has helped to break the barriers of traditions; it has also made the life of Indian women more complex. Indian women with her traditional moral consciousness and limited professional skills find herself more isolated and insecure.” ( Agrawal 10)

The novel is set in both New Delhi and Canada of the seventies. The whole story can be divided into two sections. In the first section the life of thirty one year old Nina who lives in an Indian traditional orthodox society has been discussed. In the latter section the married life of Nina and Ananda in Canada is described in detail. Nina teaches English literature at Miranda House and lives in a one room apartment at Jangpura Extension, Delhi with her widowed mother. She is an independent woman, financially sound but like all other Indian daughters she is a burden and responsibility for her mother as she is unmarried till the age of thirty. Kapur focuses on her mother’s concerns about her daughter’s unmarried status. It is a common tradition in India to marry a daughter at an early age as marriage is the guarantee of their safe and secure future and gives them a social status. “For girls marriage is the only means of integration in the community, and if they remain unwanted, they are socially viewed, so much wastage” (Beauvoir 447). Nina’s mother also wants her to get married. In search of a suitable bridegroom for her daughter, she even goes to the doorsteps of an astrologer. Contrarily, Nina is caught in a dilemma. She does not want to leave her widowed mother alone and get married. She is very well acquainted that, “every marriage is (not) a good news for Indian men (are) mother-obsessed, infantile, chauvinist bastards.” (9) Nina’s mother’s search for a suitable bridegroom soon ends when she gets a marriage proposal from Ananda who is a Canada based dentist and lives alone as he lost his parents at a very young age. His sister comes with the marriage proposal which doesn’t make any difference in Nina’s life, as it would be very difficult for her to leave her mother alone. But ultimately she agrees to get married for her mother’s happiness. “Nina

had not realized that being thirty would be so difficult. Actually she had expected to go on feeling young alone and strong till she died” (49). In a middle class Indian society, marriage is considered as the rebirth of an Indian woman as it transforms her whole life where she has to adjust in a new environment and perform her marital responsibilities. In Hindu mythology, marriage has been described as one of the essential sanskaras (sacrament) for both the genders. A woman is defined as the Ardhangini, emphasizing the oneness with her husband but till date she is a subservient partner in marriage. “They exist in relation to a particular male principle and it is their mission to cement that principle” (Nabar 34). A girl is taught by her mother on her wedding day that her husband is now everything for her and it is her duty to keep him and his family happy. Every young girl dreams of a loving and colorful marriage which very often shattered because she is perceived in terms of her gendered identity rather than an individual.

Nina after marriage reaches Halifax with Ananda. She resigns from her job of a lecturer which in reality is her loss of identity. Through the story of Ananda and Nina, Kapur also focuses on NRI marriages in which a woman has to sacrifice a lot. She gets uprooted and has to move abroad to live in an alien culture. As a result, they start feeling depressed, dejected and nostalgic. After moving to Halifax, it becomes quite difficult for Nina to adapt in a new culture and country where her teaching degree is worthless and she has no identity of her own. Moreover, she is unable to conceive a child. Nina feels suffocated and from here begins her tussle for survival and existence. She feels alienated and longs to return back. Even her most favorite pastime reading fails to keep her engaged. She is in a place where everything, even her dressing sense, is looked down upon by Ananda and the Western people. “For the first time in her life she felt out of place. Wrong clothes, shoes, handbag. Maybe in their eyes she was like the woman sweeping” (104). Nina feels isolated. She is doubly displaced. She has lost her home and her identity. She cries, “I miss home--- I miss a job --- I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?” (237) Nina’s sense of loss takes her to a group of women who work on feminist principles. She wails before Beth. “Everything is very strange... I used to be a teacher, in fact I taught for ten years before I came here. And now I do nothing. I have not even been able to conceive. Am I locked into stereotypical expectations? I don’t know” (232) Nina has to adapt not only with the new culture but also with Ananda, who begins showing his patriarchal dominance. Kapur has also thrown lights on the NRI marriages, where couples are deracinated from their culture and then find it difficult to spend time with each other. Further, they also fail to acknowledge each other’s feelings and desires. Nina, after trying to fit in her marital role, subsequently realizes about her acquiescent status and passes through the predicament of identity crises that inspire her to acquire a financially empowered state. Nina however is dispirited by Ananda, who compels her to fulfill his wish of having children first, than her career. He says, “Don’t be silly. We are starting a family\_ what is the point?”(143).

Here, Manju Kapur has projected how men put obstacles in the path of a woman to prevent her from acquiring a desirable career for herself and motherhood often becomes a tool for them to tie a woman to maternal responsibilities. Children become a device for men to imprison women forcibly in marriage as observed by Germaine Greer, who affirms that men may, “Even determine to impregnate her to break her self-sufficiency” (244). Cultural and social norms enormously influence the working of gender norms and limit her role to a wife and a mother. A woman is consigned to the realms of familial subjugation and at every stage of her married life, she is denied to grow and fulfill her potential as a human being. An American Psychologist, Jean Baker Miller writes:

“Men can never accept women as their equals because: When women start realizing their own interests and self-growth, they feel intuitively threatened by the danger of the loss of essentials that women have been carrying for the total society”. (Baker 120)

Nina however refuses to be confined indoors and starts looking for a job. She also tries to assimilate herself with the new culture as assimilation and acculturation is the only escape from alienation and isolation in a foreign land. She begins to wear western clothes and eat meat. She joins a course in Killam library to keep herself busy and also joins university to make herself self-reliant. During her course in the university she falls in love with Beth who rapes her when they have gone on a date. Initially she feels guilty after having sex with another man but soon she rationalizes herself by thinking that good sex is the right of every individual. She thinks:

“That she liked, she had lived. Who can feel guilty about living? Judging from the evidence, and the sexual therapy centers, every citizen in North America regarded good sex as their unalienable right. It was her right too.” (263)

Nina is now a transformed woman. She has totally assimilated the western culture. There was a time when Nina used to think that children and motherhood make a woman complete. She used to imagine her child going to preschool. The same Nina who used to talk about her pregnancy, infertility treatments, motherhood and who was once regarded as an orthodox and conservative woman is now a completely changed woman. She has started living for herself. She has now come out of those conservative thinking in which a woman's world revolves around her husband and child. Now her prime concern is her job and her library degree. Her sense of guilt also goes away when she finds wavy blond hair next to her pillow. It tells her the whole story of an unfaithful husband. She is now relieved and enjoys her transgression. She is now an independent, self reliant and empowered woman. She sets herself free from all the social and matrimonial ties and decides to go away from Halifax.

Manju Kapur through the character of Nina very beautifully portrays the picture of a subjugated, submissive and subaltern woman who is the victim of both patriarchy and colonialism. She also focuses on how she breaks all the barriers that stop her to attain her lost identity in a foreign land. She suggests that economic independence makes a woman more confident and helps her to deal with all the personal problems all by herself. Her alienated and isolated life makes her internally so strong that she learns to manage her life on her own terms. Women like Nina fight for their rights, establish themselves as an individual and resist all forms of exploitation whether it is patriarchal, matrimonial or social.

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