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Diasporic Elements In Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*

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Abstract: Over the last two-three decades, diaspora literature has attracted worldwide attention. Many Indian English women writers such as Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and many others, have delineated the diasporic themes in their fictional writings. Manju Kapur's fourth novel *The Immigrant*, which came out in 2009, is dedicated to the depiction of an immigrant person's struggle and experience in going overseas and settling down there. Issues like migration problems, cultural conflict, sense of alienation, discrimination based on skin colour, language, appearance, choice of food, etc., plague the immigrants in a routine manner. In *The Immigrant* Manju Kapur explores the circumstances and challenges faced by two immigrant characters in Canada, who are also the central characters in the novel, namely, Nina and Ananda. The narrative portrays their grief, conflicts, adjustment and adaptation of new culture, new language, and new attire in a foreign land. They leave behind their homeland, their family and relatives because they want to fulfil their dreams of a good life and achieve something new in life. But peace of mind eludes them. Manju Kapur paints this situation quite poignantly and evocatively.

Keywords: Diaspora, Immigrants, Migrated, Culture Conflict.

Diaspora literature began to attract worldwide attention in the last quarter of the previous century. The term 'diaspora' concerns persons who leave their native places and settle in another land for better life. "A Diaspora is scattered population whose origin lies within a smaller geographic locale. Diaspora can also refer to movement of the population from its original homeland." (Nayar 2008:189) Diaspora literature dwells on cultural conflicts, discrimination, adaptation, assimilation and many similar issues related to migration of people and population from one country to another. The immigrant person faces new culture, food, language, clothes, customs, traditions, etc. He/she is not easily accepted by the natives of his new abode. He/she has to take many initiatives for adopting the ways of the new country. It is not easy for the immigrant person to assimilate into new place, people and society. It is much like the experience of someone who is in an alien land. Diasporic writings describe the new culture in the life of the immigrant, which is "an imagined culture...having grafted itself into the imagination of diasporic community, it becomes part of the thriving culture." (Lav 2005:245)

The diaspora theme has been explored by a lot many Indian English novelists who have lived abroad for some time and have personally seen and lived through many situations faced by the migrated people who often crave for their home land, native culture and tradition; they yearn to reconnect with their friends and relatives of the past. There have also been writers who do not possess substantial experience of the lives of the immigrant people yet they have captured evocatively their predicament. Among the Indian English women novelists who have dealt with diaspora in their fiction, the names Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Manju Kapur are prominent. This paper aims to explore and interpret diasporic elements in Manju Kapur's novel *The Immigrant*.

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Manju Kapur is a well-established writer of Indian English fiction. Her fictional world mostly centres around the lives of men and women of the middle-class section of the Indian society. She has given special focus on women's struggle both within and outside the family and their battle for asserting their individual identity in the society. Manju Kapur's first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, was published in 1998. It received national and international acclaim all over the 1999. It won her the prestigious Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1999. Her second novel, *A Married Woman*, came out in 2002 and was shortlisted for the Encore Award. Her third novel, *Home*, was published in 2006. It was shortlisted for the Hutch Cross Word Award. *The Immigrant* is the fourth novel by Manju Kapur. It appeared in 2009. *Custody*, her fifth novel, came out in 2011. *Brothers*, which came out in 2016, is her most recent novel.

The Immigrant as the title clearly suggests is about the life experience of an immigrant. In this novel Manju Kapur beautifully depicts the consequences of immigration through Nina and Ananda, who are the central characters in the narrative. They are a newly-wed couple. Both are immigrants in Canada. This novel narrates their grief, joy and struggle in coming to terms with the challenges thrown up by their becoming immigrants. A critic aptly sums the story: "*The Immigrant* is a pensive and compassionate tale of those who try to knock the doors of the west for better prospects in their lives without behind the great culture loads. Living abroad as an immigration is not easy without many adjustments as it happens in the case of Nina and Ananda. East is east and west is west and no one can bridge the gap without adjustment. Hopes and desire, failure and frustration could not minimize without adjustment." (K.K.Singh 2015:112)

The novel opens with Nina's introduction. An educated woman, she is working as a teacher in Miranda College in Delhi. She is in her thirties, but still unmarried. In her family, there is only her mother. Her father died when she was very young. After that they shifted from her grandparent's home in Lucknow to Delhi. Like a typical Indian mother, her only wish is that her daughter Nina gets married as soon as possible. She has done everything to find a good match for Nina, like doing all sorts of 'pooja' (offerings to God) and religious rituals and showing her 'kundali' (horoscope) to all sorts of astrologers, and asking her relatives and acquaintances for a suitable match for her daughter. She wants her daughter's marriage to happen as soon as possible. The unmarried status of Nina is a hot topic in her college and the neighborhood. The novelist writes, "The major topic of conversation in last eight years had been Nina's marriage. Who, when, where, how? The hopes each conversation generated gradually lost their luster as the years went by and nothing changed." (12)

Manju Kapur reveals the stark reality of the Indian middle-class society in which if a girl, who is in her thirties and is still unmarried, is a hot topic of conversation in amongst neighbours and relatives. Almost everyone keeps asking the girl's family when she will get married. This is common social attitude of people in general towards the unmarried woman and her family. Nina's mother wants to marry off her daughter as soon as possible. She goes to the astrologer who tells her after enquiring about Nina's education that finding a groom for an educated girl is a difficult task. He says, "Things are not easy if you are educated. The mind needs companionship, the search become longer." (12) On the question of marriage, the approach of the people and the society is quite orthodox and conventional. The education of a girl and her high qualifications are a problem as far as settling her marriage is concerned. Besides, the mother's aspirations for Nina's marriage are high. She constantly prays to God for a good match for her daughter. Nina gets frustrated and tells her mother, "I don't see NRIs or foreign service officer lining up to marry me. Get real ma.' Hasn't happened doesn't mean it won't. Everything is possible." (11) Perhaps, every daughter's mother wants the world's best groom for her daughter like Nina's mother. When an NRI's proposal comes for Nina, her mother's happiness knows no bounds. She tells Nina about the proposal of Ananda, who is settled in Canada and does medical practice there as a dentist. He is single member in his family. He has one sister, namely, Alka who is married and lives in Delhi with her husband and children. Now all attention goes to Ananda.

Now the focus shifts to the life and struggle of Ananda as an immigrant in Canada. We are told that eight years ago Ananda completed his dentistry study and began his medical practice as a dentist in a north Indian city, namely, Dehradun. He comes out as an ideal son who earns and takes care of his parents. Then a tragedy occurs in Ananda's life. His parents die in an accident and all his happiness and dreams lie shattered. After this tragic incident, his sister Alka wants him to get married soon but Ananda is not interested. His maternal uncle who lives in Canada asks him to shift to Canada. Ananda decides to move over to Canada because he wants a change in his life after his parents' death. His sister Alka is not happy about his decision because his brother is the only one for her in the family after their parents' death. She becomes sad and tells him, "I will never see you. You are all that is left of ma baba....remember if you don't like it, you can always come back." (17) But Ananda flies away to Canada. He leaves behind his relatives and his homeland. The

separation from one's native place, old family and friends is not an easy thing. But he has got his dreams of a good future, and he wants to achieve something new in life. He goes for his immigration and joins the foreign land.

The narrative describes in detail Ananda's immigration experience and how he tackles the situations in a foreign place. He soon adopts the new things in his life and assimilated with new people. Ananda lives in Canada with his uncle's family. He lives with them, but there is no feeling like being in a family. His uncle and others in that family help him learn new manners and give him advice from time to time for navigating his way out there. He has to do all his work on his own. Facing much pressure due to all this, Ananda feels heavy in his heart at night. The novelist describes his situation thus: "tears gathered and fell silently as he sat huddled on the soft yellow silk love seat, shivering with grief and cold in his new pajamas." (19) It becomes clear from the suffering and predicament of Ananda that migration brings in its wake a lot of challenges of living for the immigrants. For example, in the name of adjustment and assimilation, the immigrant person has to accept norms and manners prevalent in the foreign land. A critic comments: "Immigration compels them to adopt the contrasting culture of foreign country breaking down the native boundaries. Migration no more leads to separation but may be seen as rebirth, reinvention in a new place, city, country marked by a new culture. The baggage of the past never sheds but carries with him and he starts to interpret and recognize the contemporary alien experience." (Maitra 404:2014)

Ananda goes through similar circumstances. He resides in his uncle's house and has to abide by many things which are not suitable to him. His liking. He has to do all his work by himself, and not ask for any help. His uncle tells him that in Canada there is no one who is dependent on others. This is Canadian culture: everyone is free and independent; no one interferes in other's privacy. He counsels Ananda: "Family here means different thing beta. We help you be independent. We do not want to cripple you; he could almost taste the sugar on the pill being used to get rid of him. With distance the feeling of rejection became less, the understanding more, but the shame remained." (29) The fact is this that they all (his uncle and his family) want to get rid of him and suggest him to find a separate accommodation for himself. Ananda understands the whole situation and begins to look for a room on rent. In this he is helped by his friend Gary who offers him a place in his house on rent. Ananda shifts there after saying thanks to his uncle and his family: "thank you, Lara, Lenny, aunty, uncle. I am sorry for any inconvenience I might have caused you." Through this situations, Manju Kapur is able to depict the dry behaviour of relatives who are already settled in foreign countries. They behave like strangers towards the immigrant person, and pretend that they do not know about his native land. Ananda takes a sigh of relief and feels easy at his own rented home. Now in his own rented house, he is free from the worry of pretending that he is a Canadian. He can be his own and can do what he likes. After this Ananda also tries to adopt several new things. He tries new food, especially, non-vegetarian food. He also tries to assimilate with new people like Gary and develops relationship with Sue. This is the fate of an immigrant person like Ananda because he has to almost compulsorily adopt new culture, new food, new language, new attire, and try hard to get close to native white people in order to escape the feeling of alienation in a foreign land. Salman Rushdie has pinpointed this predicament of migration: "A migrant suffers traditionally a triple disruption. He loses his place; he enters into social language; he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behaviour and codes are unlike and sometimes even offensive to his own." (1991:254)

On the other side, Ananda continues his relationship with Sue. They both try to understand each other. Both are trying to know more about each other's culture, traditions and values. Both move forward in their relationship and become intimate, but Ananda does not feel comfortable in being intimate with Sue. He neglects Sue's feelings. She is bold enough to discuss it with Ananda: "May be you have issues around sex. Here it's no big deal, but in your culture it must be different. Deep down perhaps you are not comfortable? Not at all. I am very broad minded." (38-39) Manju Kapur frankly describes the relationship experience of Ananda with Sue. It ends up because of Ananda's sexual inadequacy, and also because he feels shy before Sue. Ananda tries to console himself and says that this is not in his culture and tradition; that is why he fails to do well with Sue. After this failed relationship, he totally ignores other white women because he cannot match their boldness. He, in fact, avoids his humiliation. Now Sue gets involved with Gary and both get married soon. Ananda also attends their marriage with awkwardness.

In this background, Ananda is ready to accept the marriage proposal suggested by his sister. He thinks that Indian girls are not so bold and frank. Ananda writes a letter to Nina after seeing her picture and bio-data. Nina is curious as to why an NRI is interested in marrying an Indian girl. She agrees because of her mother's pressure. Both get acquainted to each other through letters. Ananda comes to India and meets Nina

and after that they are ready to marry. After marriage Ananda and Nina stay in Oberoi hotel. They spend quality time there and make love, but again Ananda has some issues with getting intimate with Nina who is now his wife. He starts avoiding Nina, which creates tension and trouble in their relationship. Manju Kapur writes, "Nina had imagined a very different consummation. As she lay in bed, she tried to transform reality into a scenario that would not confuse or upset her. Togetherness was the important thing. To be critical of how it was achieved was against the spirit of marriage." (89)

Ananda does not give good response to Nina because of his physical inadequacy. Nina also avoids sharing her feelings with Ananda. As a traditional woman, she gives preference to togetherness over sexual intimacy. The novelist rightly suggests that although the institution of marriage is based on mutual understanding, love and care, physical intimacy is also an integral part of it. In Ananda and Nina's marriage, Ananda hides things from Nina. He does not really understand the bond between husband and wife. On the other hand, Nina as a woman expects and desires her husband's attention, love and care, which she fails to get with Ananda. She realizes that there is some problem with Ananda but as a cultured and traditional woman, she does not find it right to be open about it. Both choose to remain silent. Ananda returns to Canada. Nina is waiting for her visa approval. After her visas are approved, she takes the flight to Canada but the checks-ins and other travel formalities trouble her and she gets frustrated. She thinks that she is humiliated because she is alone and that if her husband was with her, she would not have faced discomfort. Her state is described by the novelist in the following way in the novel: "Numbly, she walks down the corridor. She feels soiled, accused of trying to take something not rightly hers. In her heart, she holds Ananda responsible for humiliation." (107)

Manju Kapur poignantly portrays the situation of immigration and entry to a new world. During this process, the immigrant person feels discriminated and humiliated. Nina hates all of this. Nina thinks about Ananda and wants to tell him, "This is not your country. You are deceived and you have deceived me. You made it out to be a liberal haven where everybody loved you. This woman's looking for reason to get rid of me. I am the wrong color; I come from the wrong place. See me in this airport, of all the passengers the only one not allowed to sail through immigration, made to feel like an illegal alien. See, see, see." (108) Finally, she is happy to arrive in Canada thinking that she is going to be his husband and live together in their home there. Manju Kapur presents the circumstances of Nina's adaptation of new culture and reveals that firstly Nina enjoys to wear 'sari' and 'salwar kamij' in Canada but when she finds people discriminating her by her appearance, she starts wearing western dresses. In this way, immigrant persons have to change their style, habits and appearance. Both are happy and enjoy togetherness.

But Ananda is not the same anymore. He has changed over the years. For one, he has turned non-vegetarian. After some time, trouble starts in their marriage. She feels loneliness and suffers from homesickness after Ananda leaves for his clinic. He also does not give much time to her. Nina starts thinking about having a baby which might fill the gaps in their relationship. But Ananda is not interested. He rejects Nina's idea and says that first he wants to settle, then he will think about the baby. But this is his lame excuse to hide his condition of physical inadequacy. Nina feels sad and lost. Her dream and hope of a happy married life with her husband are gradually shattered due to Ananda's behavior. Nina still does not question Ananda and tries hard to give time to their relationship. She meets Dr. Abbot, gets tested herself and learns that everything is fine with her. She asks Ananda to see the doctor but he refuses. Rather, Ananda makes a visit to California secretly and takes sexual therapy there. He lies to her about it. Ananda gets surrogate during this season. After this therapy, Ananda is full of confidence and notices that his condition has improved. After returning from California, he wants to spend time with Nina and gets intimate with her. But Nina feels uneasy about this sudden change in Ananda's behavior. She asks him about his visit directly. Ananda speaks the truth about his sexual therapy. Ananda gets perturbed by Nina's constant queries. According to the novelist, Ananda's masculine pride comes in the way and holds him from coming true and clean before his wife. Instead, he blames Nina for being narrow-minded.

All of this rocks their marriage. Nina involves herself in her study and library, and Ananda involves himself with Mandy secretly. At this juncture, Nina gets attention of Anton and both get close. She confesses, "Anton and she were not into having a relationship. It was purely meeting of bodies a healthy give and take." (269) Thus, we get to see how a man and a woman move on to other relationships in their respective lives. Both do not feel guilty about it. Both are comfortable with their new partners. Like Ananda is happy with Mandy. Nina is happy with Anton. But they know well that this is temporary relationship. But after a point Nina gets upset with Anton who sort of forces himself upon her.

Thus, we see in the story of *The Immigrant* that whether it is one's homeland or a foreign land, the mentality of men towards women is the same. They force themselves on their partner. Nina remains silent before Ananda, and she also does not open up about Anton's exploitation of her. Interestingly, she does not know about the infidelity of her husband. After return to India on her mother's death, she finds the truth about Ananda's relationship with Mandy. She does not say a single word. He also does not say anything to Nina. Both are so alienated from each other. Nina leaves the house and Ananda stays alone. In reality, both got separated long ago. This is the real immigration in their lives. Manju Kapur writes, "perhaps that was the ultimate immigrant experience not that any one thing was steady enough to attach yourself to for the rest of yourself, but that you found different ways to belongs ways not necessarily lasting but ones that made your journey less lonely for a while. When something failed it was a signal to move on, for an immigrant there was no going back.....pull up your shallow roots and move. Find a new place,new friends,new family. It had been possible once;it would be possible again." (330)

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