

# A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF ALIENATION AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN MANJU KAPUR'S THE IMMIGRANT

Mrs. V. Krishnaveni

Phd Research Scholar, Department of English,  
Sadakathullah Appa College, Rahmath Nagar, Tirunelveli.  
Email - krishnaveniganesh6@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *The psychological term 'Identity Crisis' is defined as 'a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society. The immigrants always face a close cultural conflict which has always been followed by their attempts to adjust or engross, either to be known by a separate identity as a racial group or be assimilated. So they shift their focus between their social and cultural identities which are in a way unstable and fluid. Despite living in a foreign land for a considerable amount of time, their identities are connected directly or indirectly with their old homelands. Manju Kapur is the most prominent contemporary novelist of Indian English Literature. Manju Kapur in her novel The Immigrant brings up the elements of identity crisis in the context of migration. This novel mentions all the troubles and traumas faced by immigrants in abroad. The immigrants always face a close cultural conflict which has always been followed by their attempts to adjust or engross, either to be known by a separate identity as a racial group or be assimilated. So they shift their focus between their social and cultural identities which are in a way unstable and fluid. Thus the present article tries to analyse the psychological study of the quest for identity and alienation in Manju Kapur's The Immigrant.*

**Keywords:** *alienation, quest, identity, immigrant.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The psychological term 'Identity Crisis' is defined as 'a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society. Ericson, a German born psychologist and psychoanalyst known for his theory on 'psychological development of human beings,' coined the term. The search for and discovery of identity has been a recurrent journey throughout humanity's history, defined and explored in literary works. Manju Kapur is the most prominent contemporary novelist of Indian English Literature. She teaches English literature at Miranda House, Delhi University. She has five novels and an anthology to her credit till date. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* was published in 1998 and awarded the prestigious commonwealth Award for best first novel, Eurasia region. Her second novel, *A Married Woman* was published in 2002 and shortlisted for the Encore Award, her third novel, *Home* in 2006 was shortlisted for Hutch-Crossword Prize and the fourth novel, *The Immigrant* 2008 was shortlisted for the India Plaza Golden Quill Award and the DSC Prize of South Asian Literature in 2010. Her fifth novel *Custody* published in 2011. Manju Kapur deals with various themes such as Feminism, Diaspora, Social and Economic Forces, Gender relationships, and lesbianism. Manju Kapur in her novel *The Immigrant* brings up the elements of identity crisis in the context of migration. This novel mentions all the troubles and traumas faced by immigrants in abroad. The immigrants always face a close cultural conflict which has always been followed by their attempts to adjust or engross, either to be known by a separate identity as a racial group or be assimilated. So they shift their focus between their social and cultural identities which are in a way unstable and fluid. Despite living in a foreign land for a considerable amount of time, their identities are connected directly or indirectly with their old homelands. G.S. Sharat Chandra expresses this sense of alienation in his writings as:

I leaped from one life to another, and in between lay nothing but vacuum... we remain at large distant and clothed by our separate worlds. We know that the bonds we shared while growing up do not unite us anymore... In these new worlds, immigrants readjust and reinvent themselves, struggling to find their place in an alien landscape, netting some gains but also incurring deep emotional losses... (7)

Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* is the story of Delhi-based Nina Batra, a 30-year-old unmarried lecturer in English at Miranda House, Delhi University. The death of her diplomat father has left Nina and her mother struggling to make ends meet in strained circumstances in a small flat. The novel begins on her thirtieth birthday with a grim realization of her diminishing prospects of marriage. But, a visit to an astrologer sets her life on a different path through an arranged introduction with an NRI dentist, who arrives from Halifax, Canada to meet her. Ananda, the prospective bridegroom, left New Delhi a few years back after his parents were killed in an accident. Ananda brings to his marriage a kind of loneliness centered on his sense of sexual inadequacy. Suffering from premature ejaculation he has failed to have relations with Western women earlier. After an initial inertia, he secretly visits a therapist later and almost cures himself. He becomes the insensitive, straying husband, and takes on a young, white mistress. Nina is left

alone to brood over her pitiable state. But, in a few days, she too joins a library science course and has an extramarital affair. The couple seeks neither to understand nor love each other. Nina finds she is not only ill prepared for the cultural gulf she encounters, but also the wide open distances in her barren relationship. Nina suffers a two-fold alienation. In a foreign land with no one to talk to but the husband, she feels rootless. This displacement is not merely a change of address but is also socio-cultural.

Immigration results in the physical as well as imaginative border crossing. In addition to this is the oppression that a woman suffers from in a male-dominated society. The cultural dislocation, alienation and loss of identity related to diaspora thus open up multiple perspectives for writers who wish to portray these experiences in their writings. The immigrants or the expatriates are citizens of two countries. So they shift their focus between their social and cultural identities which are in a way unstable and fluid. Despite living in a foreign land for a considerable amount of time, their identities are connected directly or indirectly with their old homelands. The novel explores the issues of alienation and the quest for identity. It discusses common themes of alienation, dislocation of Indian culture, diaspora and quest for identity. It reflects the loneliness and the search of self being focused on the world at large. The beginning of the novel 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. Ananda and Nina little by little switch 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 ultimately graduating from salwar kameez to Western dress. Nina finally gives way to the picture Ananda presented to her of her life abroad. 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. Nina's initial failure to strike a balance between her American and Indian identity brings in an identity crisis in her life. This results in cultural isolation that leads to personal isolation as well. Life in Canada is complete contrast to Indian ways to Nina. It began with a sense of freedom, freedom from the probing eyes of the family members, neighbors "No servant, landlord, landlady, neighbor or mother was there to see (IM113). In the beginning, the privacy is pleasing but soon it turns to loneliness with no one to talk to, no one to share with the common everyday pleasures. It is difficult for an Indian wife more to adopt those situations. Homesickness sets in, and she feels lost without any one to share her feelings. A Mechanical life with western food could not attract her. She had no other activity other than reading books or watching television and later she realized that it is not her aide "books are powerless to distract, when house and its conveniences can no longer completely charm or compensate. Then she realizes she is an immigrant for life" (IM122).

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 (IM121). 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?' (IM222) 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.' 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 realizes she is an immigrant for life.' (IM 122) 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.' (IM120) The Indian immigrants come across with the identity problems and 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 in 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. Though the novel takes up the seventies as its background, the feelings of isolation and dislocation that Manju Kapur portrays would surely strike a chord with the present-day Indian immigrants trying to adjust to life in the West on the one hand and life of the West on the other hand. The couple plays out a simultaneous existence in two cultures and face varied problems at different stages on the road to their assimilation of a new culture. They suffer different kinds of losses – of identities, familial love, economic security, social status and feel insecure about the preservation of their own religion. Nina's initial failure to strike a balance between her American and Indian identity brings in an identity crisis in her life. This results in cultural isolation that leads to personal isolation as well. Ananda had to face the awful loneliness of a recent immigrant when

he arrived in Halifax for the first time. In his uncle's home he missed the intimacies of Indian life, the communal meals, rich spices and vegetarian diet he was used to. But soon his feeling of rejection faded away and he assimilated the western culture. Though he becomes a reputed dentist and tries hard to establish the fact that he is more a Canadian than an Indian by nature, his sense of alienation remains. He becomes Andy and starts taking non-vegetarian meal fairly soon after moving to Canada. But for Nina, it is harder to adapt. She believes that using the word Andy in her home is to carry alienation into the bedroom. Kapur explores the special challenges that the young immigrant wives face in their life. They are already so pressured in professional and reproductive terms, and life to them becomes an even more impossible balancing act inside a foreign culture. The immigrant who comes as a wife has a more difficult time. If work exists for her, it is in the future, and after much finding of feet. As the novelist avers:

Nina has no idea why this is happening to her. She has a valid visa... She is decent, respectable, god fearing and worthy... She feels edgy; she is alone with a woman who makes no eye contact, for whom she is less than human... Though she was addressed as ma'am no respect is conveyed. Nina has been used to respect. It came with her class, her education, her accent, and her cloths. (IM107-08) Pushed into the burden of staying at home jobless and being denied a life outside of marriage, she has to console herself that planning the weekly menu together secures the future. As she changes from sari to jeans and takes her first morsel of meal which she so hated, the readers realize how depressing it can be to dress every day entirely differently from how one is used to dress, to live on food the thought of which has always been nauseating. One weekend Ananda is delighted when she accepts both fish and beef in her diet. While he is happy that life will be much easier now, Nina lets out the hidden truth - her taking of fish and beef was the result of fragmentation and distress, not a desire for convenience. Nina's own slow process of assimilation results in changing from an easily recognizable Indian woman in an oversized overcoat to a student of library science at the local college. The idyllic future - mother, daughter and grandchild united at last in a Canadian home - that Nina had dreamt of, shatters when her mother dies alone in her apartment. She realizes that there is no going back for an immigrant, but at least she can establish an identity of her own apart from being Ananda's wife: "I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?" (IM237). She faces the problems of her marital life boldly, defies the role that tradition has scripted for her, and qualifies as a librarian. When she boards a Greyhound bus bound for another new start, the readers feel that she has found her own identity

## **2. CONCLUSION:**

Through the ages, Indian woman's history of suffering and rebellion against patriarchal dominance remains almost the same. There are old models and newer ones but the paramount question of adjustment or rebellion in search of identity still remains. Male domination which leads to woman's subjugation, discrimination, exploitation and oppression presents sexism in its worst form. Socio-political problems of contemporary life portrayed in terms of individual's quest for identity and freedom along with a sensitive handling of issues like gender, sexuality and diaspora make 'the immigrant' a novel with a difference.

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