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**FUTILITY OF CONJUGAL RELATIONSHIP IN
 MANJU KAPUR'S *THE IMMIGRANT***

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Abstract:

*This research paper attempts to evaluate the significance of marital relationships in an alien location with reference to Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*. The protagonists namely Ananda and Nina find it difficult to balance their Canadian experience and Indian essences amidst a sexually insipid marriage. However, being married in Canada is a double whammy for Nina as she distances from her native land, people and endures her loneliness in a land where she knows no one. She also feels displeased about her husband's sexual 'performance' which makes her despondent. This novel showcases their hypocritical relationship and effortlessness of cementing marriage resulting in bearing the brunt of their misdeeds.*

The focus of this research mainly stays on the sexual aspect of their relationship which is also one of the main themes of this novel. Traditions and social mores push physical aspect of marriage to the background, while upholding that sanctity of marriage go beyond carnal pleasure of married couple. However Canadian culture gives complete freedom to a couple to walk out of marriage if one is dissatisfied in it. Here, Nina embraces the Canadian attitude towards marriage and refuses to compromise with Ananda over physical and emotional issues. She studies, works and aims at financial, emotional and moral independence which put her marriage at stake.

Keywords: *Marriage, Immigrant, Sexuality, Patriarchy, Alienation.*

Introduction

Indian women writers have gloriously made their mark in the international literary scenario through their portrayal of independent and deep thinking woman. Contemporary writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Bharati Mukherjee, Gita Hariharan have played a pivotal role in giving a voice to their women characters by lending them a voice or an opinion which talks about their side of the story. We see in their characters having shed stereotypical image of woman: silent victim within patriarchal rules who endures pain inflicted by society. This new 'breed' of Indian women in fiction speaks against social mores, asserts her individuality with an awakened sensibility towards the world around her. It is interesting to note this strand in the following words, "Apart from love, sex and contemporary reality, Indian English novelists have written feminist novels. Women novelists assert the rights of women to live their life in their own way" (Das, 57).

Manju Kapur is one of the eminent Indian English writers who portrays the transformation of Indian women from being submissive nonchalant to liberated and empathically aware about their individuality. Her works represent the issues faced by the contemporary women - their will to seek self-identity, fulfillment and liberation from the shackles tradition and social mores. She writes about the desperate efforts of a middle class Indian woman seeking a life outside the cobweb of responsibility within traditionally oriented family. Her works are woven within the conflict between the tradition and modernity.

The Immigrant set in India and Canada in the mid-seventies revolves around the marital relationship of Ananda and Nina. This novel talk about the tribulations and struggles of an immigrant Nina, who forsakes her career, country, independence and her whole social life only to fit into a patriarchal institution called marriage. Like all the other novels of Kapur, this novel too deals with the theme of survival of a woman against all odds that are pitted against her.

A major part of this novel deals with the theme of marriage and its implications on a young couple Ananda and Nina where Nina travels to Canada to live with her husband. Sexual dysfunction forms the major theme of the book which results in the subsequent problems in their relationship.

The Reality of Marriage

The protagonist of this novel is Nina, a thirty year old lecturer in English at Delhi University who gets married to a Canadian dentist Ananda Sharma and relocates to Halifax, Nova Scotia and experiences her new life in a new set-up. The author often talks about the immigrant experience felt by Indian diaspora outside their country through the novel. However, the theme of the novel is about the complexities of having an arranged marriage and its ramifications in a place where this institution is not sacred anymore and therefore is free of societal expectations. The marriage ceases to be a lifelong affair and dies slowly along with the Indian-ness of the newly migrated bride. The initial fervor of this marriage is retained by the physical needs of the couple, who are unable to find sexual gratification in their respective lives. Gradually they get to know the unpleasant realities of marital life. Anupama Chowdhury writes-

“Socio-political problems of contemporary life portrayed in terms of individual 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” (41)

The story of this novel takes place in India and Canada. However the central theme of the novel, like every other novel of Manju Kapur remains the same. Nina is a rebel, who fights to find her identity and independence throughout the novel. She is keen to get married but only to make her mother happy and relieved of her responsibility to get her daughter married to a good household. It is the societal expectation which would not let Nina work, make a career and look after her widowed mother but would force her to leave everything and stay with her husband with or without a career.

“The major topic of conversation in the last eight years had been Nina's marriage- who, when, where, how? The hopes each conversation generated gradually lost their lustre as the years went by and nothing changed. From where could fresh possibilities be unearthed on the eve of her thirtieth birthday? The lack of these, reflected in her mother's dull and mournful eyes, was what she was going home to.” (Kapur, 3)

Her mother's desperation to get Nina married sets the background of her struggles to fit into her eventual marriage to an NRI Ananda Sharma, which is arranged by the girl's mother and boy's sister. However it is not more than a physical fascination for the couple who are initially very happy about the marriage. Nina gives up her teaching career and leaves her mother in order to be with her husband in Canada. At the onset, everything looks perfect and dreamy. Nina and Ananda are very happy in their small world which is made more beautiful by their grocery shopping in the evening, dining out at the Indian restaurant and being happy in the company of each other. One thing which leaves Nina pleasantly surprised is Ananda's self-sufficiency and independence in doing the household chores. It is quite the contrary for Nina who is brought up with the beliefs that a wife has to take care of the daily needs of her husband. Since Nina doesn't work there, it becomes natural for her to do daily chores for her husband. Ananda however has been accustomed in doing his work all by himself and doesn't ask Nina to do it for him.

The lack of dependency often makes a couple less attached to each other. It is the Canadian way of life where husband and wife share each other's work. It is very different from the way Indian marriage works. Being from India and adapting the western way of living could be quite confusing for any first

generation immigrant. However, Ananda and Nina have one thing in common loneliness in absence of their families. Ananda has his dental practice and a small circle of friends there. But Nina is all alone and without a job which makes her feel depressed. So she passes her time reading, sleeping, and shops for junk food during her solitary outings at local food store.

Ananda, on the other hand is fighting his own battles in Canada .He suffers from premature ejaculation which has resulted in insignificant sexual activity in his life. This again becomes one of the reasons of marrying an Indian girl who would probably overlook his sexual activity and remain content in the given circumstance. Ruth Scurr notes-

“Ananda has been professionally successful, and has made a small number of trusted friends beyond the circle of his relatives, but he brings to his marriage a more profound kind of loneliness centred on his sense of sexual inadequacy. He has tried and failed to have relations with Western women. He suffers from premature ejaculation: a condition he thinks an understanding and loyal Indian bride will cure.”

Nina has experienced sex with her ex-boyfriend Rahul, her commitment phobic teacher fifteen years older than her, who like a serial lover, enjoys a physical relationship with her and moves on with his life. This becomes a reason for her to be physically dissatisfied with Ananda whom she considers a perfect husband. She immediately begins to compare Ananda and Rahul, which makes her feel emptier than before.

“Nina had imagined a very different consummation. As she lay in bed she tried to transform reality into 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.

Involuntary comparisons arose. Rahul, with his obsessive talk of sex, endlessly curious about what she felt in what position, this technique versus that. So much so that at times she felt objectified. At his desire to penetrate from behind she had been outraged, what did he think she was? His little virgin he replied, who needed to be educated so they could feel as much pleasure as possible. That was what love was all about.

Later she giggled, and you call me a virgin.

You still have vestiges, I have to be very careful to remove them all.

Virginal or not, what she had felt with Rahul was alive” (Kapur 91)

Nina is very keen to become a mother soon. However when she discovers her husband's sexual inadequacy and his awkwardness in accepting it and getting it treated rather than spraying anesthesia on his reproductive organ to elongate the climax, she feels disheartened and gives up the idea.

“Dispassionately, Nina observed that Ananda got offensive when he felt attacked. This was not a nice trait, but she ignored it for the moment, wondering whether she was wrong in thinking that her appetite for sex was greater than her husband's. It was true though, he did need to be rested, his hands needed to be absolutely steady and he often complained of pain in his lower back. She wondered whether she needed to be more empathic, but the state of permanent sexual frustration she was in made it difficult. It grieved her that Ananda had no notion of how she felt. Her idea of matrimony was a husband who was a little more alert to the discreet clues she let drop.” (Kapur 181)

“Though married, the last time was nowhere in sight. After dinner, when she tried to get cosy with Ananda he would often say later, I am tired. And Nina would feel humiliated at what seemed a reversal of gender roles; she was the monstrous cornucopia of appetite.” (Kapur 181)

Nevertheless, Ananda too suffers from an inferiority complex and being a male, he would never disclose his feelings to his wife. It is one of the reasons which prevent him to meet the gynecologist Dr. Abbot as he fears about the revelation of his condition. He has already been unlucky in relationships with

western girls owing to their outspoken nature in their dissatisfaction with his sexual performance. This is one of the main reasons for him to find an Indian wife who would respect him in every way and would never contest his sexuality. He is therefore taken aback when Nina openly tells him that there is a scope for some improvement in their physical relationship.

“That night it was Ananda who lay awake instead of Nina. Why was he like this? If his wife felt there was something wrong, despite fooling him initially, what hope was there? In the porn he read men could go on forever, ejaculate, then back to it for a few more hours. Was this pleasure never to be his?” (Kapur 184)

“The tragedy was that he was only exploring the possibility of sexual therapy now, when marriage restricted his choices. For a brief moment he looked at Nina's sleeping form with hatred” (Kapur 185)

He secretly goes to California for two weeks sexual therapy. There, he also learns tricks to control his climax from a surrogate partner to cure himself. Nina feels betrayed when she learns about the treatment from him. Her consternation is short-lived when she notices improvement in Ananda's performance in the bed. This happiness is not able to last longer when her husband fails to satisfy her. Nina wonders if she is fitting into role of an ideal Indian wife who keeps silent about these situations and would never consider it as a hindrance in a happy married life.

“Distance grew between them. Nina felt imprisoned by the stress, and assured him that there were other things beside sex in marriage. Relationships had to develop, feelings had to be shared, surely he understood that? It was only her tension about a child and her age that drove her to find solution. Otherwise she knew things took time, of course she did” (Kapur 185)

These problems in her marital life make Nina miserable and frustrated, so she works part-time in the Halifax memorial library and joins a women support group who address the problems of the members and counsel each other. This group is made on the strengthening the beliefs of women on the ideologies of feminism. This makes Nina less guilty about her desires and inspires her to find her feet in Canada. She also wants to divert her attention from her husband and fight her loneliness since she knows she cannot have a child soon. “I miss home-I miss a job- I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?” (Kapur 237). Frustrated and dissatisfied, Nina enrolls herself for a degree in library science which guarantees her employment and independence in the foreign country.

Ananda with his newly found confidence regarding his sexual performance after his visit to San Francisco begins an extramarital affair with Mandy, his young receptionist. It makes him avoid his wife and so he doesn't mind her going to work. In fact, he is the one who creates distance between him and Nina in order to spend his time and money on his white girlfriend, who has left him awestruck and given him physical satisfaction. His relationship with his wife has always been formal and he has always been under a pressure to maintain a clean and professional reputation with his wife.

“Mandy encouraged him to be wild, free, uninhibited, playful. With Nina, he was his mother's son, his sister's brother, the good husband, playing out a role he had been trained for since childhood. Nine years in Canada had not dimmed the need for this person. No wonder he had not been able to succeed with white women before. He needed to stabilize this part of his life. There were many unseen pressures that had spoken through his body.” (Kapur 242)

He likes to explore his wild side with Mandy with whom he feels young and playful. His adultery reaches its peak when he sends his wife's to India for a vacation. Ananda becomes more experimental and enjoys one night stand with random women by passing off as an Egyptian like Omar Sharif. Clearly, there is no room left for reconciliation with his Indian avatar and his western experience.

Nina befriends his classmate Anton who is a Russian staying in America. Their friendship turns

into a steamy affair and Nina discovers sexual gratification with Anton which she has failed to find with her husband. She goes on with her relationship with her 'friend with benefits' while being a good wife to Ananda. At this juncture, their relationship turns hypocritical and both began to cheat on each other. Surprisingly, the spark of physicality which has been absent in their relationship finds its way into their respective affairs leaving both happy and satisfied but guilty at the same time.

Soon Nina realizes that Anton is no better than Rahul and is only interested in sex than anything else. When the truth dawns upon her, she feels exploited, used and abstains from having a relationship with Anton. However, worse happens when Anton rapes her in Ottawa while they are out on a study tour. To compound her sorrows, she comes to know about her mother's death in India.

When she comes back from India after her mother's last rites, she feels broken and despondent. This is when she comes to know about Ananda's secret affair when she discovers a golden hair on her pillow. This revelation breaks her from inside and she realizes the futility of Indian values in the absence of Indian surroundings and people who sanction the sacred bond of marriage.

Thus, she breaks all her ties and goes to New Brunswick hoping for a job and independence from all Ananda and her Indian roots which have begun to haunt her.

“The things that might have made separation in Indian difficult for Nina were hers to command in Canada. Financial self-sufficiency, rental ease, social acceptability. She looked down the path on which there would be no husband and saw the difficulties, the pain and the solitude. Nevertheless treading it was not unimaginable.” (Kapur 333)

Neelam sums up the whole novel beautifully in these lines-

“Nina accepts the bitter truth of her jarred relationship; if she asks questions, she has to confess her own crime also. Nina never finds an answer why they betrayed each other.” (138)

Ashok Kumar makes an apt observation which brings out the naked truth behind the real faces of protagonists of this novel.

“Compatibility between husband and wife is indispensable. But in the present novel sex overtakes other factors needed for compatibility between husband and wife. Nina and Ananda both want to join the bandwagon of liberal sex. Nina gets a white male partner Anton and Ananda gets a white female body of Mandy. Both deceive each other. Social, psychological, and ideological factors remain on the fringe while sexual factors remain at the centre.” (65)

Conclusion

This novel is an attempt to understand the complexities of an Indian arranged marriage of Nina and Ananda. To compound the matters further, sexual dissatisfaction becomes a reason for the unhappy and phony relationship of Ananda and Nina where there are deliberate attempts to conceal the topic of sexuality behind the veil of Indian culture. And then, the exposure to Canadian culture gives them a chance to cheat on each other. They both indulge in extra marital relationships and discover physical intimacy and sexuality outside their marriage. This makes their marriage, love, trust and relationship crumble and results in their ultimate separation.

Kapur doesn't give any rules and regulations for a successful marriage in this novel. She paints a brutally honest picture of an arranged marriage which could easily run into troubled waters in absence of social norms and patriarchal ideologies. However, she makes it clear that a happy marriage requires a certain level of transparency and honesty between two people. Without these traits, a relationship would not last long. This is how Nina and Ananda break each other's trust and ultimately jeopardize their relationship without any hope for reconciliation.

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