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**A STUDY OF CONJUGAL RELATIONSHIPS IN  
*THE IMMIGRANT***

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**Abstract:** The present study attempts to examine how Manju Kapur in her famous novel *The Immigrant* explores the depths of an Indian woman's mind while struggling in search of her own happiness in a foreign country. Moreover, it carries layers of meaning and implication. On the surface, it is about the arranged marriage of Ananda and Nina, but gradually it delves deep to discuss a wide range of other issues like quest for identity, marital relationship, adultery, differences between the Eastern and the Western culture, and life of an immigrant with his cultural and emotional baggage.

**Keywords:** Implication, alienation, surrogate, maxim, conceive, immigrant

**Full Research Paper:**

Manju Kapur's fourth novel *The Immigrant* centers on what has frequently been called an identity quest. It is identity which differentiates individuals. Identity is constructed on an individual basis but within a given social structure. This novel shows that alienation from one's own society could lead to a corresponding alienation of identity. As Anupama Chowdhury observes:

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.  
(Chowdhury, 2008)

Like her earlier novels, Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* is about a woman, Nina. Nina is an English teacher at Miranda House, New Delhi. She lives in a one-room apartment with her widow mother. Nina is financially self-reliant yet the typical mindset of considering a daughter a burden, a liability, a responsibility of her mother. This makes Nina's life burdensome. She has lost her father early in life and now her mother is only her anchorage. She wants to see her mother happy so though grudgingly sometimes she complies with all her wishes even making a trip to the astrologer regarding her marriage. At the mature age of thirty, she has less hope of finding a husband yet nurtures a faint hope of a better tomorrow. At the beginning of the novel, the novelist gives a vivid description of her physique:

Nina was almost thirty. Friend and colleague consoled her by remarking on her radiant complexion and jet black hair but such comfort was cold. Nina's skin knew it was thirty, broadcasting the fact at certain angles in front of the mirror. Her spirit felt sixty as she walked from the bus stop to the single room where she lived with her mother. Her heart felt a hundred as it surveyed the many years of hopeless

longing it had known. (*The Immigrant*)

When a marriage proposal comes for Nina from an NRI, Ananda, a dentist by profession settled in Canada, her mother's happiness knows no bounds and she prays for the proposal to materialize. After a brief courtship mainly through the exchange of letters and after much doubt as to why an Indian having a Canadian citizenship is looking to India for a wife and after much deliberation, Nina finally succumbs to the rosy picture which Ananda presents 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. (78)

She agrees to jump the fence "To join legions of women who crossed the seas to marry the men living in unseen lands" (78). The marriage takes place with a lot of show of material wealth of Ananda. His Canadian friend Gary and his wife Sue, come to attend the marriage, so does his maternal uncle with his Canadian wife and children. Ananda puts all of them in five-star hotels and after the marriage ceremony, the couple too moves to Oberoi hotel for their honeymoon. Nina worries about the expenses. She knew NRIs did stay in such hotels, but anxiety about money had been her companion since infancy, and it asserted itself on every possible occasion. Ananda, on the other hand, was flush with dollar confidence. (89)

After two days Ananda left for Canada leaving his newlywed wife behind to join him after getting her visa. After three months she got her visa and proceeded to cross the ocean. The first bitter experience of being an immigrant comes her way when she is asked to step

aside. The immigration woman examines each page of her passport suspiciously.

The color of her skin shouts volumes in that small room. Rage fills her, why are people so silent about the humiliations they faced in the west? She was a teacher at a university, yet this woman, probably high school pass, can imprison her in a cell-like room, scare her and condemn her. Though she was addressed as ma'am, no respect is conveyed. (106)

This is the first deception one experiences in the west. The country which is projected as a liberal heaven is, after all, a racist where a person is judged by the color of his skin.

Here the life of Nina, in complete contrast to Indian ways, begins with a sense of freedom, freedom from the probing eyes of the family members, neighbors, and domestic help.

No servant, landlord, landlady, neighbor or mother was there to see. After years of night and day protection against the eyes of the world, it felt strange to abandon the shield that had defended her modesty. (113)

Initially, the solitude is pleasing but soon it turns into loneliness. Homesickness sets in, and she feels forlorn. To fill the loneliness she yearns for a child but is unable to conceive. No amount of persuasion can make her husband to accompany her to a doctor's clinic. Finally, she decides to get herself examined and finds everything to be normal on her part. Loneliness drives her to books which she usually borrows from a library. Here she gets a part-time job and gets acquainted with a group of women who vow to become confidante and co-counselors to establish a feeling of sisterhood. Fearing exposure of his

physical inadequacies Ananda secretly makes a visit to California and after two weeks of training returns with newly learned techniques of overcoming his inadequacies. Nina feels hurt at Ananda for keeping his visit a secret from her.

Now the obsession of Nina to become a mother changes to longing for self-dependence. She gets a job in a library. This is her first step to autonomy. It is now she who leaves the house first and comes late. This job brings great excitement into Nina's life. She finds everybody nice and friendly there but a man named Anton becomes her special friend. Gradually their friendship brings them close and Anton becomes her surrogate. Anton, though married, has no inhibition in committing adultery and believes in the maxim "Nobody owns anybody". (258) Nina feels life pulsating with these developments. Manju Kapur describes:

For the first time, she had a sense of her own self, entirely separate from the other people, autonomous, independent. So strange that the sex did not make her feel guilty, not beyond the initial shock. Who can feel guilty about living? Judging from the evidence and sexual therapy centers, every citizen in North America regarded good sex as their inalienable right. It was her right too. (260)

Nina breaks another taboo when she returns home. She tastes the trout offered to her by her husband. Here Kapur explains her situation as:

When she first came to Halifax, not eating meat had been a way of remaining true to her upbringing. In Halifax, her vegetarianism was treated respectfully, as part of her beliefs, but she felt false every time she concurred with a picture of herself as a traditional, devout Hindu. Really, what did she care about a religion she never practiced?

After she had had sex with Anton, it seemed especially hypocritical to hang on to vegetables. (266)

While Nina carried an illicit relationship with Anton, Ananda too had been carrying such a relationship with Mandy but without the knowledge of one's deception to the other and each felt liberated because such relationships were not relationships but "purely meeting of the bodies; a healthy give and take" (269). So there was no reason to feel guilty. Nina convinced herself that, "I am not taking anything away from my husband, I am not she, she rationalized, as it became clear that her trysts with Anton were not going to stop. But this same rationalization fails when she was to face Gayatri. She could not have brought herself to hold Gayatri's hands, look into her eyes and lie, even by omission. Honesty was the first principle of that group. Even though she herself had heard many stories of affairs, joyous flings and sorrowful betrayals, but now when it was her turn to reveal one such story, she chose the easy way out and prevaricated" (271). She left the group. Similarly, she avoided meeting her dearest friend Zenobia when she visited India after a gape of two years.

Aren't you going to meet your friend? Asked mother once they returned to Delhi. Of course, but Nina did nothing. When she lay down at night, she thought of Zenobia pressed on her like an unfulfilled obligation. Her experiences in Canada made her feel flawed, as though she lacked integrity. (287)

Thus, the novel *The Immigrant* explores NRI sensibility and experience of many Indian educated women who marry the Indian emigrants. The novel is written with brilliance and feminist issues in the conversational narrative style. The theme of the novel makes readers cautious in its

broader perspective. While Kapur's other novels analyze the feminist issues, women's alienation in patriarchal society, tradition and individual women's predicament, *The Immigrant* narrates the predicament of an Indian woman in foreign land in her immigrant status where she faces the challenges in her life but finally abandons to the glories of the western world and desires to return back to her motherland for some consolation and contentment in life.

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