

Reclamation of the female body in Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*

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Abstract:

Manju Kapur, a professor at Miranda House, Delhi University brings to light the subjugation of the female body in Indian culture. An examination of *The Immigrant* exposes the objectification of woman in the institution of marriage which robs her subjectivity. Internalising the cultural values from childhood, Kapur's heroine battles to affirm her self and her feminine desire. She explodes at an opportune moment and the readers can witness the physical and psychological transformation of the female protagonist who transgresses the laws of patriarchy to gain autonomy over her body and let her body vibrate as she pleased.

Keywords: marriage, social conditioning, transgression, body, eroticism

1. INTRODUCTION:

India is a country where marriage is a sacred institution. The cultural ideologies of virtue, chastity and honour are imposed on the female body and hammered into the minds of individuals through social conditioning. Exploring issues of the body is a taboo and invites criticism from all grounds. Manju Kapur takes a bold and radical step to subvert the cultural norms imposed on the female body and valorise the woman as the subject. We notice a shift in the minds of the woman writers who focus on the recuperation of the female body from the strangling cultural chains to seek corporeal pleasure and affirm the right that woman has on her body. Manju Kapur is inspired by the happenings in the Indian milieu which she examines in her novels.

Analysis :

Manju Kapur's novel *Immigrant* opens with the following lines: "And her womb, her ovaries, her uterus, the unfertilised eggs that were expelled every month, what about them? They were busy marking every passing second of her life" (Kapur, 2010:1). This description spells on the life of Nina, a young woman of thirty. Nina is

an elegant single woman who desires to have a marital life. Although Nina is educated and financially independent, her status as a single woman often evokes a sense of lack in her. Nina has grown up internalising cultural notions of femininity. Nina has been conditioned to believe that marriage accorded a social status to woman. Nina's ageing delays her chances of marriage. She offers her prayers every day to be married soon. Strictly adhering to the patriarchal laws taught by society, she often dreams of her future husband and her marital life. Adrienne Rich affirms:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a family, social, ideological, political system in which men - by force and direct pressure or through rituals, traditions, laws, language, custom, etiquette, upbringing and division of labor - determine what role women are allowed to play (Rich, 1986: 21).

Adrienne Rich's statement is true in this context where Nina is trapped by patriarchal ideologies built through culture and tradition.

Thanks to the divine blessing, Nina receives a marriage proposal from an Indian family whose son has settled in Canada. He is Ananda, a charming, and

envious dentist to whom Nina gets married. Carole Pateman states that “the marriage contract is a kind of employment contract. To become a woman implies to become a housewife; who is someone who works for her husband in the marital home” (Pateman, 1988: 116). Through this marriage, Nina enters into a contract which requires the woman to perform all the household tasks for the husband. By respecting the vows of consecration to the husband, she fulfills her family duty.

During the nuptial ceremony, Nina awaits the realization of bodily exploration and the fulfillment of orgasm. Nina is utterly dismayed. There is no sexual foreplay, no caressing, and no orgasm. The sexual exploration lasts only a few minutes. Nina’s dreams are shattered. Within a few days, Ananda is forced to leave for Canada alone as Nina awaits her visa. After several months, Nina leaves for Halifax. Overcoming her fear and agony of travelling to a foreign land, she arrives at Halifax with the hope and excitement of a happy married life. She is typical vegetarian; she eats rice with lentils and vegetables while Ananda consumes fish and meat. As a woman who has been accustomed to traditional dress and vegetarian food, Nina finds it difficult to adapt to the Western world.

Every night her passion is aroused and she awaits pleasure, penetration and marital security. As Beauvoir says about female sexuality that “ the sensitivity of the erogenous zones [...] are so numerous in women that one can consider her whole body as erogenous ”(Beauvoir, 1976: 77, Translation is mine), Nina burns with the desire for sex. But almost every night is spent in desperation. Nina lets out violent and heartbreaking cries in the bathroom. Boredom and loneliness set in Nina. Beauvoir also contends that

he founds a home, he settles down, he anchors himself in the world; in the evening, he gathers in the house where the woman watches over the furniture [...]

over the past that she stores up (Beauvoir, 1976: 225, Translation is mine).

As Beauvoir says, Ananda takes care of her job until the evening while Nina, who locks herself at home, has nothing to do and ruminates on her status and identity. She spends the whole day wandering the streets, running errands, reading novels, and eating to her heart’s delight. Nina is totally disappointed when Ananda deprives her of sexual pleasure because of his sexual dysfunction - premature ejaculation. The lack of pleasure, the absence of orgasm, and the inability to get pregnant haunt her and make her life miserable. She feels confused, bewildered and abandoned. Nina is a traditional Indian woman who believes that a child can render her life complete. Following the idea of Beauvoir who says that

the woman goes through several phases in relation to motherhood. As a child, it is a miracle and a game: she finds in the doll, she senses in the child to come an object to possess and dominate. (Beauvoir, 1976: 340, Translation is mine).

Nina expects a baby ardently. Nina has been conditioned and prepared since childhood amongst other Indian girls for marriage and motherhood. Nina’s biological clock resonates strongly in the vastness of Canada. Every time she has sex with her husband, she imagines that her eggs shall be fertilized. But the bleeding and pain during menstruation reinforce her infertility. Her desperation and lack of confidence in her femininity increases.

One day, while wandering, she glances at the sex magazines that provoke her desire and fantasy. The magazines instruct that a harmonious life is the essence of a fruitful sexual relationship. She comprehends that sexual fantasies should be shared by the couple. Nina gathers her courage to confide in her husband her state of mind and embarrassment. Little by little, Nina approaches the subject of their sexual life in order to have an improvement. Overcoming shame and humiliation, she expresses her sexual dissatisfaction to

Ananda. She asks: “Ananda, are you satisfied with our sex life? - Why ? - Because I feel – I just feel - there is room for improvement”(Kapur, 2010: 180). Nina expresses that she feels trapped by stress and grief owing to sexual dissatisfaction and frustration. She begs Ananda to undergo a therapy and offers him a consultation with a specialist. But, Ananda loses his temper stating that that it was too early to think about children and rejects Nina's sexual frustrations. Nina becomes impatient but she does not want to destroy her marital life and love with her husband as Bourdieu says, “[...] love is accepted domination, misunderstood as such and practically recognized, in passion, happy or unhappy” (Bourdieu, 1998: 148, Translation is mine). Ananda controls almost all of Nina's desires; she complains that “we are conditioned to think that a woman’s fulfillment lies in birth and motherhood [...]” (Kapur, 2010: 230). She plunges into misery since she is unable to conceive a child but she admits that she attaches herself to stereotypical feminine expectations.

Without informing Nina, Ananda leaves for New York to undergo sexual therapy to improve his manhood. It is a therapy that requires sexual intercourse with a surrogate woman. Ananda spends months with this woman in pursuit of sexual prowess and virility. Meanwhile, Nina is lost in the grandeur of the Canadian country. She becomes melancholic and ponders over the thought that she has no identity of her own. She is only the wife of Ananda, his shadow in Canada. To overcome her frustration, Nina to look for a job. Nina determines that she needs education and a job to build her individuality and become independent in Canada.

Nina enrolls in the Department of Library Science and also works as a part-time librarian to make her own money. Nina begins to work to end the exploitation of women in domestic life as Agacinski puts it: “The only way to think about economic

liberation will be to bring women into the economic sphere as it was. It was considered that to put an end to the exploitation of women in the domestic space, they had to leave the house” (Agacinski, 1998: 114, Translation is mine). Nina begins to claim her own space and move towards the autonomy of her existence. She spends her valuable time learning and working. Among the students is Anton, a Russian, who adores Asian women. Nina and Anton begin to establish a friendly relationship that becomes more intimate. The Department organizes a field trip to Ottawa to visit the national library. Nina invites Ananda to Ottawa so they can be together. Nina thinks it's a great opportunity to go on vacation with Ananda. But Ananda refuses to join her on this field trip. Nina visits the library with Anton and the other students. Anton is always close to Nina. He drops his hand on her arm and smiles like a little boy. Nina is able to read the charm and desire in Anton's eyes. That night, when Nina returns to the hotel, Anton accompanies her to the room on the sixth floor. He wants to make love with Nina who is pretty, smart and insightful. He loves the Indian woman who is so different from the western woman. Anton walks into Nina's room and sits on her bed. He touches her gently and pulls her close to him. But Nina hesitates a little as she is married. But Anton gives her the courage to take on her own life and tells her: “I am married too. But it's stupid to confine yourself to one person for your whole life. What about adventure, what about experiencing differences? Nobody owns anybody, you know.” (Kapur, 2010: 258). He starts kissing Nina, pulling her legs around her body.

After having transgressed the moral and cultural codes, it appears to Nina that she is no longer virtuous; her body is no longer sacred and she consumes meat and fish. At times, Nina is tainted and blackened by her own infidelity to Ananda. But she is persuaded by the fact of her sexual

dissatisfaction with Ananda. After several months, Ananda returns to Halifax and throws himself on his impatient wife. The sexual therapy works wonders. Nina is relieved, satisfied and surprised by his sexual performance. But Nina suspects if the therapy has forced Ananda to have sex with someone else every day.

As a confidence building measure, Ananda begins to count the duration of his sexual performance with a digital clock. He feels triumphant when his sexual performance is effective. In this regard, Pateman says that “[...] masculinity means sexual mastery” (Pateman, 1988: 185). Ananda has mastered the art of sex as he asserts his masculinity. But Nina cannot appreciate the statistics of sexual duration because sexual love is not always about performance but about intimacy. Ananda's sexual therapy improves his prowess, but disrupts the marital life. He begins to explore the white bodies of Canadian women who offer him joyful adventure. He is tired of the usual sex with his wife and loves to sleep with Mandy, his beloved. He spends all his money on Mandy and begins to lose his love for Nina. Gradually, Ananda refuses to support Nina financially. When Ananda learns that Nina spent three hundred dollars on a sweater, he claims that he cannot tolerate Nina's reckless extravagance and becomes enraged. Nina is humiliated and offended by his remarks. Ananda's misbehaviour multiplies her pain and fury. Claire Chamberland's statement is justified in this context where he asserts that:

the aggressions of control generally expose the power issues within the family and reveal the nature of social relations of domination and subordination or even the level of conflicts and controversies that oppose the man to his woman. They reveal structures of inequality and also internal struggles for dominance, influence or control over resources, decisions, ideas or behaviours (Chamberland, 2003: 36, Translation is mine).

Ananda's aggression begins to take its toll on their relationship. Nina chokes due to Ananda's indifference. She realizes that her job will be a treasure that will assure her liberation. Ananda embarks on the exploration of white bodies which seem more exotic and more seductive to her.

Nina is again imprisoned by loneliness. In this silence, she is invaded by the fear of guilt. She is also ashamed of her adulterous life. She wonders about his abundant desire; the overdose of sexual love makes her wonder if this is a gender role reversal. Subsequently, she decides firmly not to sleep with Anton anymore. Nina frees herself from Anton because he seeks pleasure on his body by force. Moreover, she decides to leave the institution of marriage and lose her identity as the wife of Ananda.

Nina learns of Ananda's infidelity. She is totally overwhelmed when she finds golden and white hair in her bed at home. She understands that someone else replaced her in her bed during her absence. The hair explains many things to him: the distance, the silence and the indifference of Ananda. This discovery prepares Nina for her transgression of the institution of marriage.

Nina transgresses the codes established by patriarchy in order to reject her subordinate status and assert her feminine power. She rejects passivity and engages in a struggle against patriarchy. The resistance is exercised through the body to deconstruct patriarchal domination in order to be able to affirm the feminine self. Cixous, a groundbreaking French feminist who pins her theory on psychoanalysis, asserts that woman must be a good fighter to get out of passivity. She says that:

a woman without a body, a mute, a blind, cannot be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant, his shadow. We must kill the false woman who prevents the living from breathing (Cixous, 2010: 41, Translation is mine).

The recovery of the female body is Cixous' most important claim. Cixous appeals to

women for the liberation of female sexuality in order to inscribe femininity. She observes that women should free themselves from patriarchy through the rediscovery of the female body.

As Cixous pleads to work against repressive forces that cause political oppression, the subversive actions of Nina echo Cixous' revolutionary ideas. Nina rejects marital confinement, subverts patriarchal values and recovers her body and seeks her extramarital and adulterous affair. Nina is a conventional Indian woman who believes that the destiny of women is marriage and procreation. She suffocates owing to the lack of pleasure, the absence of orgasm, and the inability to conceive a child. Her husband, Ananda subtly controls Nina's sexuality because of the fear of losing his masculinity. Nina's existence and her desires are almost overlooked by him. Nina is reduced to a status of the other; her feminine existence is in danger. She is not recognized as an individual who must have access to her bodily pleasures; even when Ananda undergoes sex therapy, it is to enhance his prowess and assert his masculine power. Nina becomes an isolated woman, forced to lock herself into passivity and pain. The control of the female body, resources, and decisions explain the social relations of domination and submission of the patriarchal universe.

Nina, who does not experience bodily pleasure with her husband, transgresses patriarchal values by seeking an extramarital affair with Anton. Nina is portrayed as a woman who does not accept her status as a victim of patriarchal exploitation. She frees herself from her passivity and revolts against patriarchy through her body. Nina's extramarital affair is a resistance to deconstruct patriarchal domination and affirm her sexual liberation.

Cixous says: "And every story, every myth tells her: there is no place for your desire in our affairs of state [...] Beyond that is the fall: enslavement of the one and the

other, domestication, internment in the family, in the social role" (Cixous, 2010: 79, Translation is mine). Since there is no place for feminine desire in the patriarchal universe, Cixous observes that all women must affirm their transgression and seek their bodily jouissance. She affirms that woman must regain her pleasure and her immense bodily territories which have been confiscated by the man. Cixous seeks to release all bodily desires of women. The woman must focus on the multiple sexual drives of her body, exploring, discovering, and exposing the source of power and energy to affirm self-identity. Cixous argues that female sexuality is infinitely plural. Cixous suggests a cosmic superiority to female sexuality over male sexuality. She states: "Her libido is cosmic" (Cixous, 2010: 119, translation is mine). She describes this female body as multiple with sexual organs everywhere. Unlike male sexuality, the female body has a greater number of erogenous zones. And then the woman can find pleasure all over her body. Cixous affirms the positive potential of female desire.

Cixous also talks about female masturbation which is quite artistic. It emphasizes the auto-erotism of the female body. For Cixous, the woman must seek her lost body, recognize it, learn to love it, and make it live and enjoy personal pleasure. Erogenicity and female jouissance can deconstruct patriarchal society and affirm female identity. Ever since Nina was young, she has taken to masturbating hoping that her loving spouse will come to satisfy her sexual hunger. When Ananda proposes his love to Nina, he touches her body and kisses her. Nina does not hesitate, she invites him. Her body exhibits the desire for sexual pleasure. On the day of the nuptial ceremony, Nina blushes thinking of the bodily exploration. Owing to sexual hunger, every night she tries to wake her husband up by making noises but in vain. Nina, who has masturbated throughout her youth is forced to

masturbate even after her marriage to have her own pleasure. Cixous says:

this practice of extraordinary inventive richness, in particular masturbation, is prolonged or accompanied by a production of forms, a real aesthetic activity, each time of enjoyment a sound vision, a composition, a beautiful thing (Cixous, 2010: 38, Translation is mine).

For Cixous, female masturbation is artistic and will return female pleasure. She urges the woman to seek her own pleasure which is gentle and not violent. Nina seeks her own pleasure but wonders if her sexual appetite is more abundant and more monstrous than her husband's. She spends long moments admiring her dazzling body in the mirror. She loves her bare skin, the silhouette of her body and the black hair falling over her shoulders. The desire rises in her looking at her naked body. She moves her breasts in order to see the alluring cleavage and she thinks this cleavage will make any man caress and cuddle her breasts.

Dying of passion, Nina lets her body go to Anton's foreplay. He touches her gently and pulls her close to him. Anton starts kissing Nina pulling his legs around her body. He admires her naked body, caresses her and showers her with kisses. Nina moans and enjoys the rocking of her body. She finds herself arched, offering her breasts to Anton. She finds herself ardent, sensational, passionate and warm in this corporeal play. After this adventure, Nina goes to the bathroom. Kapur describes: "As she peed, she felt the soreness of her vagina" (Kapur, 2010: 260). Nina loves her body which has come back to life. She touches her body and smells the scent of sex. She feels her existence, the orgasm and the fulfillment of her body. Kapur describes Nina's personal feeling: "She had lived. Who can feel guilty about living" (Kapur, 2010: 260). Nina is not guilty of her infidelity, extramarital sex and adultery. Her body is satiated and his restlessness is calmed. She claims the body is her personal possession. It is her

inalienable right to let her body live as she wished.

Nina rejects humiliation and social questioning. The question of fidelity to her husband disappears. Kapur describes : "She had forgotten how liberating sex could be. It was the force of life, she thought [...] It was purely a meeting of bodies, a healthy give and take" (Kapur, 2010: 269). It is this bodily enjoyment that frees Nina from all her worries. Adulterous sex with a stranger revives her body. Kapur justifies Nina's sentiment: " Her body is her own – which included her digestive system and her vagina"(Kapur, 2010: 268). For Kapur, Nina's extramarital affair is a transgression of the rigid conventional construct for the pursuit of her pleasure, her freedom and her individuality. Nina's sexual violation affirms the multiple desire of her body and glorifies female sexuality. Nina realizes the transgressive potential of her body through her sexual relationship with Anton. She breaks the strangulating chains of phallogocentrism thanks to her positive weapon, the body. She discovers her pleasure and her femininity through her eroticism with Anton. She defiantly glorifies her new identity.

When Nina learns of Ananda's infidelity, she braces herself for transgression. Nina snaps out of her sluggish condition and begins to savour every breath of air. She hopes that her independence will free her from marriage and social sanctions. She also rejects Anton's invitation because he establishes coitus by force. So, Nina becomes more resistant and more rebellious. She screams violently and throws him out. Anton's violence is agonizing to Nina. The sexual life with Anton which has been pleasant becomes traumatic. She affirms autonomy over her body at all times.

Nina successfully completes her studies. She is a well qualified librarian. Nina emerges victorious from her morose and morbid condition. Despite her heavy heart, she begins to savor every breath of air. She

hopes that her independence will free her from marital and social sanctions. She frees herself from all patriarchal constraints in search of a new independent life. Her academic record is excellent. Nina can build her future and look for her roots. She reclaims her body and recovers her identity by leaving the institution of marriage. She walks determined in search of a new life. Nina says: "When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull your shallow roots and move. Find a new place, new friends, new family. It had been possible once, it would be possible again" (Kapur, 2010: 330). Nina hopes that she can build her future and seek her own space and a new family. Nina tramples the sacred notions of marriage of the Indian culture to assert her identity.

2. CONCLUSION:

To Manju Kapur, it has always been a question of ownership of the female body because Indian culture denies woman the right on her body. Devi attempts to liberate women and deconstruct the image of the ideal woman established by man and let the woman live as she desires with her body. Kapur strongly believes that when woman begins to listen to the voice of her body, it is a reaffirmation of the right on her body and reclamation of her subjectivity. Kapur showcases her protagonist as a desiring subject. The reclamation of the female body and the realisation of female pleasure reinforce the personal autonomy of woman's body rewriting the concept of femininity.

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