

MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP: THE THEME OF SEXUAL DYSFUNCTION IN MANJU KAPOORS NOVEL “*THE IMMIGRANT*”

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Abstract:

English today has become a world language both for communication and literature. This has helped a lot in the growth of Indian English literature in general and Indian English fiction in particular. Indian English novelists today have been successful in drawing the attention of critics both in India and abroad. So also, the Indian women novelists. They are establishing themselves in the world of literature winning literary awards. One such popular women novelist is Manju Kapur who has established herself by discussing candidly about love, sex, and contemporary reality. Besides she deals with a wide range of issues like an identity crisis, personal fulfilment, and inter and intrapersonal relationships. Manju Kapur is a disparagingly commended Indian novelist who has five novels to her credit, *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody*.

Keywords: lingua franca, stereotypical, patriarchal, immigrant, sexual dysfunction.

The position of English as a global lingua franca has induced consideration not only from every corner of India but the world too. Indian writings in English have accomplished a noteworthy position through the works of writers like Amitav Ghosh, Khushwant Singh, Salman Rushdie etc. However, Indian women writing in English is a novel phenomenon which is swiftly gaining significance by the permanent traces left by the works of writers such as Kamla Markandeya, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande etc. It can be said that Indian women writers have resplendently made their mark in the international literary scenario through their portrayal of independent and deep-thinking women. These women writers 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.

What we see in their characters is that they have given up the stereotypical image of a woman: a quiet target within patriarchal rules who undergoes pain perpetrated by society. These Indian women in fiction speak against social mores and assert their individuality with a stirred sensibility towards the world around them. It is fascinating to note this constituent 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)

All these writers deal with the misfortunes that a woman must undergo largely in the male-dominated Indian society but the literary works of Manju Kapur do not simply voice the boundaries levied upon a woman. She deals with a wide range of issues like an identity crisis, personal fulfilment, and inter and intrapersonal relationships. Manju Kapur is a disparagingly commended Indian novelist who has five novels to her credit, *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody*.

Most Indian women novelists base their novels around the experiences that they have had in their personal lives and thus deliberately or insentiently dwindle into the dominion of feminist proclamations of one or the other kind. The writings of Kapur establish a dissertation that does not merely aim at sabotaging the patriarchal ideas governing a woman’s life but also provides a deep perception of the man-woman relationship. She proposes a close view on the man-woman relationship ensnared in obligatory arranged marriages, love affairs that are not accepted by society), adultery, sexual dysfunction, adoption, divorce etc. The women protagonists of Kapur’s novels pass through these complicated relationships and grow into independent and self-sufficient beings. Thus, the gender relation in a patriarchal society through man-woman relationships is one of the essential thrusts in the novels of Manju Kapur. Kapur in an interview opined:

‘Well, I am very aware of feminist thinking. I have been deeply influenced by it, and I would call myself a feminist as well. I believe it is impossible to live in the world today as a thinking person and not be one, and this applies to both men and women. I do not set out with a conscious feminist agenda, but in describing the relationships between men and women a feminist perspective is often inevitable- and this applies to books written well before the term was invented.’

Since ages, the man-woman relationship in Indian society has played a crucial role in the endurance and preservation of humanity. In Indian English fiction, by women writers, which is often described as a replication of society man-woman relationships have been demarcated either as a virtuous companionship between two individuals or as an unpolished requirement for sexual satisfaction. Conventionally the baggage of honour, chastity and strictness was expediently laid on the shoulders of the wife while the husband savoured the freedom of the external world. Thus, in literature too, women were depicted as characters who were primarily preoccupied with guaranteeing domestic tranquillity. The writings presented no inner details of the female characters and they were merely relative to men. However, with the growing awareness about gender discernment, reproductive rights, and enablement of women, man-woman relationships underwent a complete transformation. The male characters of Kapur’s novels affect the psychology of women but they do not fit in the mould of a hero. On the other hand, the women characters qualify as heroes because they directly or indirectly surpass the societal restrictions forced upon them by the agents of patriarchy. Her women characters are meticulously cognizant of their position in family and society which leads to their search for individuality and freedom. They are characters of flesh and blood who prefer to dismiss unhappy relationships with men and are ready to bear the weight of their moral uncertainty and decisions. Men in her novels are represented as bigoted and adamant and are forever confused by the rebellious attitude of the women. The concern of the protagonists of Kapur’s novels is not to seek equality with men but to reflect upon their situation essentially as women. Thus, a different aspect of relationships is one of the central concerns of the novels of Manju Kapur, particularly regarding “*The Immigrant*.”

“The Immigrant” novel is set in India and Canada in the mid-seventies and spins around the theme of sexual dysfunction of Ananda and Nina. This novel talks about the misfortunes and struggles of an immigrant Nina, who abandons her career, country, individuality, and whole social life only to fit into a patriarchal institution called matrimonial. Nina, a thirty-year-old lecturer in English at Delhi University who is married to a Canadian dentist Ananda Sharma moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia and experiences her new life in a new set-up. She lives with her widowed mother who is worried by the fact that Nina is not married even in her prime thirties. Nina’s first mature love affair begins with Rahul, a professor fifteen years older to her. Nina dedicates herself both emotionally and physically to him hoping that their relationship will shoot into something more perceptible and concrete. Paradoxically, the professor deserts her without any bit of guilt, “But Rahul had always made it clear that he wanted to have his cake and eat it too. Like all cakes this one was chewed, mashed into pulp, and swallowed” (TI-6) and she is enforced to conciliate with her circumstances. Nevertheless, a marriage proposition from Ananda Sharma, a dentist in Halifax, Canada puts Nina’s mother in relief. The primary communication between Nina and Ananda takes place through the exchange of letters. Though Nina is anxious as to why an Indian living in Canada for seven years would want to marry an Indian woman yet after a long discussion, she decides to marry him. She is keen to get married only to make her mother happy and relieved of her responsibility to get her daughter married to a good household. Nina attracted by “a future, laced with choices, edged with beautiful snowflakes that glittered through the distance” (TI-78) agrees to “join legions of women who crossed the seas to marry men living in unseen lands.” (TI-78).

After their marriage the location of the novel changes from India to Canada. However, it is not more than a physical fascination for the couple who are initially very happy about the marriage. Manju Kapur handles the relationship between Nina and Ananda on two levels Sexual and Emotional. Manju Kapur gives voice to the sexual appetite of the married couple,

which is generally a forbade topic in the novels written by Indian women writers. The primary fervour of this nuptial is retained by the physical needs of the couple, who are inept at finding sexual gratification in their respective lives. Initially, they were 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. Gradually they get to know the unpleasant realities of marital life. There is no limitation or uneasiness in the relationship of Nina and Ananda, their first corporal encounter is presented thus, “She pressed herself closer. Gone was the awkwardness of words. With his free hand, he turned her face towards him and nuzzled her lips. Her mouth opened; his tongue slipped in to meet in eagerness by her own.” (TI-76) However, after sexual intimacy, Nina is disappointed because of Ananda’s egotism of being concerned about himself alone. He accessibly oversees the demands of gratification of his wife which reluctantly prompts Nina to compare Ananda with Rahul. Anand’s sexual dysfunction is not very disturbing for Nina as is evident when “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.” (TI-91) but it is his insensibility towards the emotional needs of Nina in a foreign land, voluble dissertation on the importance of money, disadvantages in India as a country and conceited about his success that stirs and disturbs her the utmost. Nina regrets her only identity being Anand’s wife, and she dissents, “The immigrant who comes as a wife has a more difficult time... At present all she is, is a wife and a wife is alone for many, many hours.” (TI-124) Nina here echoes the predicament of many wives in India and abroad who are homemakers and yearn for the time and courtesy of their husbands. Anand only focuses on the act of sex with Nina to establish himself as a manly man who makes it a motorized and fruitless exercise resulting in Nina feeling even more lonely and neglected. Perhaps Naina failed to understand Anand’s feelings and the problem he faced. Anand is fighting his own battle in Canada. He grieves from

premature ejaculation which has led to insignificant sexual activity in his life. This again becomes one of the reasons for marrying an Indian girl who would undoubtedly oversee his sexual activity and remain content in the given context. As Ruth Scurr records-

“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 Rahul, her teacher fifteen years older than her, who like a sequential lover, enjoys a sexual relationship with her and moves on with his life. This becomes a reason for her to be sexually dissatisfied with Ananda whom she considers a perfect husband. She instantly begins to compare Ananda and Rahul, which makes her feel barer than before.

“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.”

The sexual dysfunction of Anand brought into the mind of Nina the involuntary contrasts arose. Rahul, with his infatuated talk of sex, was interminably 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 annoyed, 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 chuckled, and said,

“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” (TI-91)

To gratify and quench his male ego and overcome the agony of his physical shortfalls, Ananda seeks pleasure with many women. He feels, “What kind of a man would make him, with his masculinity so limited?” (TI-151) Nina desperately desires for motherhood which does not materialize with Ananda. Thus, Nina’s marriage with Anand is on the threshold of breaking down. However, when she discovers her husband’s sexual insufficiency and his inelegance in accepting it and getting it treated rather than spraying anaesthesia on his reproductive organ to lengthen the climax, she feels disconsolate 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.” (TI-181)

What often troubled Nina was her distance from Anand and Manju Kapur says,

“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.” (TI-181)

Nonetheless, Anand too grieves from an inferiority complex and being a male, he would never divulge his feelings to his wife. It is one of the reasons which thwarts him from seeing the gynaecologist Dr. Abbot as he fears the exposure of his condition. He has already been hapless in affairs with Western girls owing to their candid 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 challenge his sexuality. He is consequently speechless when Nina amenably 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?” (TI-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” (TI-185)

What hurts Nina is when she comes to know that Anand secretly goes to California for two weeks of sexual therapy. There, he also learns tricks to control his climax from a surrogate partner to cure himself. Nina feels deceived when she learns about the treatment from him. Her dismay is short-lived when she notices improvement in Ananda’s performance in bed. This happiness is not able to last longer when her husband fails to satisfy her. Nina marvels if she fits into the role of a perfect Indian wife who keeps silent about these situations and would never consider it as a deterrent to a happy married life.

“Distance grew between them. Nina felt imprisoned by the stress and assured him that there were other things besides 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 a solution. Otherwise, she knew things took time, of course, she did” (TI-185)

These problems in her marital life make Nina miserable and frustrated and gradually Nina’s desperate desire to bear a child makes her self-dependent and she enrolls herself in a library degree course where she meets Anton. In the company of Anton Nina exceeds all the restrictions that are part of the grooming process of an Indian woman. She eats meat, smokes, consumes liquor, has sex, and finally feels modern and free from the manacles of conventions. Both Ananda and Nina continue to indulge in extramarital relationships as they believe that extramarital relationship is not a kind of infidelity but “purely meeting of the bodies; a healthy give and take.” (TI-269) However, Nina is shaken out of her involvement and feels traumatized that even after surrendering herself entirely to Anton, he remains dedicated to his wife. With time she realizes that it is unfitting for a woman to search happiness in the company of her husband or seek shelter in the arms of a lover. Nina leaves Halifax and heads “towards fresh territories a different set of circumstances, a floating resident of the western world. When one is reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home.” (TI-330)

The novel "*The Immigrant*" hints at Nina's relationship in her pre-marital, nuptial, and extra-marital stages but she discovers consolation only when she resolves to move beyond the normal existence centred on the experiences of marriage and family life by teeming the cultural paradigms of virginity, daughterhood, wifehood, motherhood etc. As Betty Friedan observes in *The Feminine Mystique*: (Friedan.1963:31)

"It is easy to see the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife in the continual demands of her time. But the chains that bind her in her trap are chains in her mind and spirit. They are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, incomplete truths, and unreal choices. They are not easily seen and not easily shaken off. How can any woman see the whole truth within the bounds of her own life? How can she believe that voice inside herself, when it denies the conventional, accepted truths by which she has been living?"

After his return from San Francisco Anand finds himself to be confident about his sexual performance and begins an extramarital affair with Mandy, his young receptionist, it makes him evade his wife so he does not mind her going to work. He is the one who makes the distance between himself and Nina to spend his time and money on his white girlfriend, who has left him enthralled and given him physical satisfaction. His relationship with his wife was just to maintain a clean and professional status 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." (TI-242)

He likes to explore his wild side with Mandy with whom he feels young and playful. His infidelity and betrayal reach its peak when he sends Nina to India for a vacation. Anand becomes more experimental and enjoys a one-night stand with random women by passing off as an Egyptian like Omar Sharif. There is no room left for compromise and reunion with his Indian embodiment and his Western experience.

Nina assists his classmate Anton whose 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 Anton while being a good wife to Ananda. Their relationship turns hypocritical and both begin to charlatan on each other. Astoundingly, the spark of

fleshliness which has been absent in their relationship finds its way into their respective affairs leaving both happy and gratified but guilt-ridden and embarrassed at the same time.

Nina perceived momentarily that Anton and Rahul are the same only interested in sex. She started feeling that she was exploited, and used and refrained from having a relationship with Anton. However, worse happens when Anton rapes her in Ottawa while they are out on a study tour.

When she returns to India for her mother's funeral rites, she feels broken and despondent when she comes to know about Ananda's marital affairs, she loses her faith in the sacred bond of marriage. Because of this incident she discontinuities all her bonds and goes to New Brunswick hopeful of getting a job.

“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.” (TI-333)

Nina admits the nasty truth of her jerked relationship; if she interrogates herself, she must confess her crime because it was not only Anand who betrayed her but she too betrayed him. Ashok Kumar makes a pertinent remark and exposes the naked truth behind the real faces of both Anand and Nina in 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 Anand both want to join the bandwagon of liberal sex. Nina gets a white male partner Anton and Anand 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)

To sum up, it can be said that the novelist Manju Kapur through her novel “*The Immigrant*” attempts to make the bibliophiles comprehend the intricacies of an Indian arranged marriage of Nina and Anand. To multifarious matters supplementarily, sexual displeasure and frustration develop a reason for the unhappy, pretentious, and insincere relationship between Anand and Nina. At the same time, both were disloyal to each other. Being Indian with an Indian cultural background, they make intentional efforts to conceal the topic of sexuality. Behind the canopy of Canadian culture, they cheat each other, by indulging in clandestine affairs to satisfy emotional intimacy and sexual gratification. Because of this, their relationship breaks down consequential in parting.

Through this novel, Manju Kapur makes it clear that a content and joyful marriage necessitates a certain level of transparency and trustworthiness between two people. Without these qualities, an affiliation and bond would not last long. This is the reason why Nina and Anand's relationship is endangered with the least hope of reunion.

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