

# The Changing Face of Conjugal Conflicts in Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*

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**Abstract:** Conjugal relationship is one of the basic human relationships which lay the foundation of family life and strengthen family bonding. Marriage is the basis of this relationship-it begins with marriage and ends with death of or divorce from the partner. It is considered to be the most important human relationships as it has a considerable bearing on domestic peace and social integration. Husband and wife are not just sexual partners in a household but two individuals physically, emotionally, financially, and socially interdependent and in serious commitment to each other. Conflicts arising out of the complications in conjugal relationship have been dealt with as an important theme in Indian English novels. Manju Kapur (b. 1948) is one of the reputed living Indian women novelists in English and her novel, *the immigrant* (2008), which primarily deals with the theme of immigration to Canada, also presents the changing faces of conjugal conflicts concerning a well settled immigrant who joins his family in India to marry an Indian girl, sponsors his wife for immigration to Canada and brings her to Canada as his conjugal partner. The paper seeks to explore the nuances of the conjugal life of the immigrant couple during the transition from nationalization to globalization, which create problems and trigger conflicts in their life abroad.

**Keywords:** Immigrants, Conjugal-Rights, Autonomy, Interdependence, Mutual-Adjustment Sexual-Dysfunction, Conjugal Conflicts, Extramarital Relationship

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Author and the Context

Manju Kapur (Dalmia), a Delhi based writer and a Punjabi by birth, studied English Hons. at Miranda House, a prestigious girl's college in the North Campus of Delhi University, and later joined her *alma mater* as a faculty in the Department of English after finishing her M. A. in English from Dalhousie University, Canada and obtaining M. Phil. in English from Delhi University. She emerged on English writing scene in India with her debut novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998) and went on to write *A Married Woman* (2003), *Home* (2006), *the immigrant* (2008), *Custody* (2011), and *Brothers* (2016). Her novels are women-centric and deal with the themes of human relationships in the context of women's struggle existence in the Indian patriarchal set up, their search for identity, and their response to the issues of infertility and infidelity in their post marital life. Her firsthand experiences of the lives of Indian women make her

novels not only representative but also authentic as she herself says in an interview to Aditi Giri, "I know the lives of women best because I am a woman. I have daughters, I have taught in a Women's College for 30 years. This is what I know from inside my books are reflections of society from woman's point of view" [1]. Her fourth novel, *the immigrant*, stands apart from her other novels as it deals with the struggle of an Indian woman in a foreign land, Canada, where she faces the challenges of conjugal life after her marriage with an NRI. It is based on Manju Kapur's experiences of life in Canada during her university education. Besides, it is worthy to mention that only a minor portion-the first 103 pages- of the novel is set in New Delhi and deals with Nina's life with her mother but its major portion - pages 104 to 344- is set in Halifax, Canada and deals with Nina's life with her husband in a foreign land.

### 1.2. Conjugal Relationship and Conflicts

Conjugal relationship is a man and woman relationship

after they get married and become husband and wife. The purpose of marriage is an intimate relationship and companionship between man and woman, satisfaction of their physical/biological needs and emotional urges and procreation to carry forward the family lineage. It is not static but in constant state of flux owing to personal, societal, and cultural reasons. Traditional marriages used to bring stability and happiness in the life of the couple. In *Moving On* (2004) by Shashi Deshpande (b. 1938), Badri, an important male character in the novel, writes in his diary, "We can never deny the ties of the body; we can never leave them behind us. The ties we forge through our bodies are the strongest, the hardest to sever" [2]. But in the modern time of globalization, problems crop up and lead to serious complications and bitter conflicts as the couples are caught up in the cobwebs of the regular routine life, sexual dysfunction, cultural dislocation and isolation, and primary concerns for career and empowerment. Such conflicts arise in the conjugal life of the NRI couple, Nina and Ananda, because of sexual inadequacy and problems in procreation and their inability to have proper communication and to reach out for adjustments make them go apart from each other to pursue their individual goals.

## 2. Main Idea

### 2.1. The Immigrant as a Diasporic Novel

Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* (2008) deals with the life of the protagonist, Nina Batra, the only daughter of Mrs. Shanti Batra and Mr. Shankar Batra, an IFS Officer who had died of a sudden cardiac arrest at the age of 45 leaving his 15-year-old daughter partially orphaned [3]. She is educated in Delhi but she immigrates to Halifax, Canada after her marriage with Ananda, a dentist in Canada. Thus, the central characters-Nina and Ananda- are both immigrants/NRIs drawn to their new lives in Canada with their own dreams and aspirations but ultimately it falls short of their realization *vis-a-vis* the general notion that the immigrant's life will automatically improve by going abroad. Nina's shift from the middle class in India to the upper class in Canada also marks Manju Kapur's shift from the presentation of sober middle class of Delhi to that of the happening Upper Class of Halifax.

### 2.2. Challenges Faced by Nina as a Woman Immigrant

The title *the immigrant* refers to the common feature of the 1970s and 1980s when emigration amongst the middle class, mostly to their favored destinations like the US and Canada, increased manifold due to the globalization in 1980s. Immigration which involves regular compromises and adjustments poses greater problems to the Indian women who migrate as spouses and are totally dependent on their NRI husbands. Nina, the protagonist in the novel, who migrates to Canada after her marriage to Ananda, an NRI, has to compromise and adjust herself not only in the matter of food, dress, etc. but also with her husband's friends who call him 'Andy' and ignore her view that 'Andy' is not a Hindu name.

### 2.3. The Immigrants' Expectations from Their Conjugal Relationship

Nina and Ananda have an arranged marriage. Their families in India were happy at their marriage. Shanti Batra, Nina's mother, was very happy with Nina's marriage with Ananda, who, like Nina, had lost his parents in a tragic accident. She was sure that Ananda would "take her out of this little room and give her the life she deserved (75)" (3). Alka, Ananda's elder sister, was satisfied that she had fulfilled her promise made to her late mother that she would arrange Ananda's marriage with a suitable girl. Nina was happy that her sordid life in Delhi would change for better in Canada. But Ananda had different expectations from his marriage with an Indian girl. He has issues around his sexual prowess. He had failed miserably in his first and second sexual encounter with Sue, a white Canadian girl. Sue told him, "Maybe you have issues around sex. Here it is no big deal but in your culture it must be different." (39) (3) His few more encounters also turned to be cold, his failures spread among his friends and he abhorred the experience of Western women which gave them the ability to compare. He did not act on the suggestion of his friends to seek medical help. As he wondered at his inability to have a white woman, he hoped that with an understanding partner, his sexual power could improve. He looked forward to an arranged marriage and count on a willing, patient, forgiving, loving Indian girl to establish himself. But he did not know that Nina whom he was going to marry was not a virgin but had been in secret sexual relationship with her colleague, Rahul, and was as able to make a comparison as the Western girls could do. As Nina and Ananda began their conjugal life in Canada, they were sure of their wish-fulfilment but this just could not really happen.

### 2.4. Challenges of Conjugal Life as NRIs

When Nina joins Ananda at Halifax three months after their marriage and settles herself in a cozy and comfortable home, she thinks of "those terrible rooms in Jungpura that her mother would inhabit alone (113)" (3). Whenever she gets upset and impatient in her marital home at Halifax, she remembers her mother's philosophy behind a perfect marriage: "...things take time. In the end patience and love achieve their own rewards. A woman's duty is to understand this (132)". But soon Nina faces boredom and loneliness. She finds herself among cold NRI relatives. Ananda has his close relatives in Canada but Nina has none except her husband, Ananda, there. She has no one to talk to but her husband and only connect to home are the phone calls to her mother. Nina and her husband talk to Shanti Batra for 15 minutes. They invite Mrs. Batra to visit Halifax. Mrs. Batra assured to be there when their first baby is born. But Nina fails to conceive even after a few months of her marriage.

#### 2.4.1. Sexual Inadequacy of Husband

Ananda brings to his marriage a more profound kind of loneliness centred on his sense of sexual inadequacy. Nina

discovers that her husband suffers from the sexual problem of premature ejaculation. Even in their first sexual encounter on the bridal night celebrated in a hotel in New Delhi, he had come in five minutes during foreplay without having entered her. In his next attempts the same night and the following nights, he could enter her but for less than a minute. He made excuses but for her the comparison of his performance with that of Rahul was inevitable. When she joins him in Canada, he gets inside her without any foreplay, not even kissing, and comes in a second. He even sprayed an aesthetic on his organ to delay his climax. He felt himself lucky in having Nina as his wife who, unlike Sue, had never said anything to make him feel bad. Nina who has been in secret physical relationship with Rahul before her marriage is able to take account of his performance in bed and tell him that there is room for improvement: "Ananda are you satisfied with our sex life? It's too short, not even five-ten seconds. Surely that can't be normal. I love you but when it is over so quickly, I get frustrated. May be this is why I have not conceived" (183)? As per his expectations Nina is not a virgin but a mature woman, who has been enjoying pre-marital sex for long and who is able to make a difference between a good and a bad sex. Obviously, Ananda's sexual inadequacy is going to affect their conjugal relationship very badly.

#### **2.4.2. Helplessness of Wife**

Nina who wanted a child not only for herself but also to fulfil her mother's wish could not hold it so long and asked him, "Then please, please Ananda consult someone. Am I the only one here who wants a baby?" (169). Ananda's indifference makes her feel helpless as a wife. She cannot share the miseries of her married life and conjugal relationship in her telephonic conversation with her mother. Her husband who is highly concerned with his privacy does not like it. He reacts strongly at the mention of Nina's mother who he feels a privy to his sexual inadequacy through her communication with Nina. On the other hand, Mrs. Batra gets concerned. As a traditional mother she could only think that the problem was with Nina and not with Ananda and so, she wanted her to seek medical help in order to find out the root-cause of her failure to conceive. When Nina shares this concern with Ananda, he considers it a violation of their conjugal privacy and feels insecure as he knows that the problem was not with Nina but with him. However, Nina visits the gynecologist at her own but her dreams of getting pregnant and calling her mother to Canada are shattered when she discovers that her husband is unable to father children. Even after having a two-week long sexual therapy which Ananda undergoes secretly at California fails to work and satisfy Nina. Preeti Kaul and Walunir point out Nina's dilemma in the following words, "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" (2018: 86) [4] But she realizes the futility of the role of an Indian wife in the absence of Indian surroundings.

#### **2.4.3. Rift Between Husband and Wife**

Nina is not able to derive marital bliss and have children from her marriage because Ananda suffers from sexual disorder. As Nina's mother promised to follow her abroad when she would get pregnant, Nina had envisaged an idyllic future of becoming a mother and seeing the reunion of mother, daughter, and grandchild in a Canadian home. But now her mother's wish to come to Canada to see her grandchild cannot be fulfilled. Ananda's unwillingness to share her concerns serves as a rift to disenchant the couple from each other. P. Neelayadatchy makes an important observation in this context: "The chasm in their conjugal life grows so vast that they gradually drift apart. Nina firms her feet to be independent and before having a child, she wishes to settle herself" (2017: 3) [5]

#### **2.4.4. Extra-Marital Relationship**

Sexual inadequacy in their conjugal relationship creates a host of problems. Ananda and Nina drift from each other, engage in extra-marital relationship and start on cheating each other. It endangers their mutual trust and stability. However, extra-marital relationship is not a taboo in the elitist Canadian society and, hence it does not make a serious issue when Nina and Ananda engage in extra-marital relationships. But their Indian background makes them keep it secret from each other. Their affairs dictated by deceit and treachery break the very foundations of marriage-love, trust, faith, and hope- and it widens the rift between them. She is having sex with white people including her fellow student of Library School, Anton. Ananda is having Mandy, his receptionist, as his mistress. Ananda is caught in his relationship, Nina is not. But their insecurity makes them turn to infidelity and finally to irreconcilability.

#### **2.5. Spirit of Adjustment in Conjugal Relationship**

Despite inadequacy in sexual life and their secret pre-marital and post-marital extra-marital relationships, the couple show some spirit of adjustment in their conjugal life. First, Ananda prepares his breakfast himself and eats it alone and so does Nina but together they prepare and took dinner. When Nina's mother learns it, she exclaims: "Is that enough (287)"? Second, when Nina starts eating meat in Canada to integrate herself to the Canadian society, she thinks of her mother; "My poor mother. She would not like seeing this (271)". But Ananda tries to offer a respite to her proposing to cheat her mother in this respect whenever she came visiting: "We can always turn veg. when she comes to visit ((271)". Third, at the news of the death of Nina's mother Ananda failed to console her but he remains by her side and arranges for her mother cremation in her absence. Moreover, Ananda meets her expenses incurred on her education, etc. with a sense of responsibility.

#### **2.6. Nina's Feeling of Liberation after Her Mother's Death**

"After the death of her mother, Nina feels liberated. According to Ursula K Le Guin (2009), "When her mother dies, her last tie to who she was and all that seemed

inevitable will break” [6]. Nina finds her own life on ‘a new footing’. “With no mother to disappoint, nobody’s expectation to meet, the bonds of marriage assumed a different level. Her life was now completely her own responsibility. She could blame no one, turn to no one. She felt adult and bereft at the same time (326)”. Janbandhu comments in this context: “Nina finally finds herself frustrated and repents in depression. At the sudden death of mother in India she wails in agony and visits India. But at the end of the novel, she makes herself ready for a new start (2014: 101)” [7]

### 2.7. *The Wife Charting Her Own Course*

Nina started gathering courage to chart her own course and make her destiny after reading Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) which “historicised her sense of powerlessness” (221). [8] Inspired by a sentence in the book “One is not born, but rather, become a woman” (220) she evaluated herself as “A woman, an Indian, an immigrant” (221) and decided to break the circle of ‘ideal daughter’ and ‘ideal wife’ drawn by her traditional mother and go on to make the best of what she had. Kavita Tyagi rightly says that Manju Kapur’s novels “serve to create an understanding of Indian women, their desires, views on marriage, concept of companionship, idea of freedom and the need to be reorganized and revered as a human being with equal rights and aspirations (2014: 344).[9]

### 2.8. *Nina Recasts Herself*

Nina finds that she is not only ill-prepared for the cultural gulf she encounters Her academic qualifications and teaching experience she had acquired in India are useless in Canada. She gets a part-time job at a local library which leads to studying for a degree at library school. She tries to peel off her immigrant’s identity by having steak, eating meat, wearing Western clothes like sweatpants and T-shirts. She chooses to confront the situation and steps up the process of healing through self-improvement. She joins a course in Library Science Programme to obtain a Canadian degree and bolster her chances of getting substantive and gainful employment in Canada. D. Anushiya Devi and L. Baskaran has rightly pointed out that Nina “has to fight against her loneliness, frustration and the Western ethos” (2015: 50). [10]

### 2.9. *Nina’s Progress from Dependence and Interdependence to Independence*

The conjugal life of Nina and Ananda has run into rough patches but in Canada, they miss the therapeutic value and problem-solving techniques of Indian family life. The people in the Western countries have to consult their therapists if they face problems in personal relationships, but in Indian joint-family system, people have a mother, an aunt, an uncle, a cousin, etc. who work like therapists for them within the family structure. According to Jasbir Jain, “Families have a wonderful way of coming together at times of crisis and of dispersing once things are settling down” (2004: 222).[11]

Nina responds to the emerging situation to breakout and establish her own autonomous world. According to Sandeepkumar N. Saraiya, “Nina becomes more confident in leading her life in her own way. She develops the courage of a voyager to step out of the mindset the most immigrants shaped in” (2021: 3) [12] She has been presented not as a victim but as a master of her own destiny, for better or for worse. This total reversal in his character has been highlighted by Nitasha Bajaj in the following words, “Gradually, Nina adapted the strange ways of the West and at the end of the novel; she becomes a new woman, totally different from what she was before her marriage in India” (2022: 6)[13] And all this could be possible because of her realization of her self-worth and her self-confidence as Madhulika Panda puts it in the following words: “Immigration calls for willingness of the mind to assimilate, to adapt oneself to the foreign ethos without abandoning their own selves” (2016: 577).[14]

## 3. Conclusion

Manju Kapur’s *the immigrant* presents conjugal conflicts in the modern context. Nina, the protagonist, occupies much of the spaces in the story and displays her sufferings, her struggles, and her strengths. According to Sona Gaur, “Manju Kapur through the character of Nina suggests that the economic empowerment of a woman helps her to attain an independent identity and ushers’ confidence in a woman to execute her decisions and copes up with her personal problems all by herself. Her loneliness, instead of making her weak, makes her strong enough from inside to manage her life on her own terms” (92).[15] We see the reflection of such an empowered woman in Nina. With her mother dead and her last tie to her identity inevitably broken, Nina becomes a floating resident of the Western world, finding new places, making new friends, and a new family. Nina’s evolution from being a weepy barren wife to an independent woman breaks the myth that a woman must depend on marriage and children for her own happiness and that a woman’s powerlessness is not defined by the borders of her country or family. Though *the immigrant*, like other Diaspora novels, is partly set the 1970s and 1980s yet the circumstances dealt with in the novel are akin to the present-day conditions in persuasively exploring the adjustments and frustrations of an educated Indian girl with an NRI groom.

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