
**Diaspora, Displacement, and the Colonial Matrix of Power in Manju Kapur's
*The Immigrant***

Dr. B. Prameela

Dept. of English, SRR Govt. Arts & College, Karimnagar

Article Received: 25/01/2025

Article Accepted: 26/02/2025

Published Online: 28/02/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.02.390

Abstract: This paper studies how colonial ideas and cultural identity are connected in Manju Kapur's novel *The Immigrant*. It looks at how these themes are part of larger discussions in postcolonial literature. The story follows Nina, an educated Indian woman who moves to Canada after an arranged marriage. Her journey helps us understand how old colonial ways of thinking still affect how people see themselves and their place in the world today. *The Immigrant* also shows the struggles immigrants face: wanting to fit in while also wanting to hold on to their cultural background. This struggle becomes clear in issues like relationships, marriage, and personal freedom. The paper uses ideas from postcolonial thinkers like Homi Bhabha and Edward Said to explain how the novel shows the deep impact of colonial ideas on people living between cultures. *The Immigrant* shows that cultural identity is not fixed, it keeps changing, especially in the lives of people who move between countries and cultures.

Keywords: Immigration, diaspora, colonial, displacement

Introduction: Manju Kapur's fourth novel, *The Immigrant*, partially set in India, delves into the complexities of migration, cultural identity, and gender roles, echoing themes found in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Like Lahiri's protagonist, Kapur's Nina navigates the challenges of dislocation and transformation as an immigrant woman. The narrative centers around two principal characters, Nina and Ananda. Nina, an English lecturer at Miranda House, Delhi University, is portrayed as a compassionate and intellectual individual who consistently offers support to those in need. Her upbringing, shaped by a diplomat father, took place largely in the West, imbuing her with a hybrid sense of identity from an early age.

Despite her cosmopolitan background, Nina holds traditional expectations of marriage, envisioning a suitable Indian partner from a respectable family. At thirty, fatigued by societal pressures, she meets Ananda, an NRI dentist living in Canada. Following their arranged marriage, Ananda returns to Canada, leaving Nina behind to await her visa. Upon arrival in Canada, Nina finds herself thrust into an unfamiliar world, where adaptation demands more than mere physical relocation, it requires a reinvention of self. She is pressured to alter her clothing, behavior, and communication style to fit into the host culture.

Kapur explores the psychological and emotional toll of such transformations. The immigrant experience, as depicted through Nina, is not just about geographical movement but about negotiating identity amid cultural dissonance. The novel underscores how immigrants often unconsciously absorb the norms of the host society, sometimes at the expense of their native cultural heritage. Through Nina's evolving identity, *The Immigrant* offers a poignant critique of the internalized effects of postcolonial ideology, gender expectations, and the often-overlooked emotional labor involved in migration. The novel not only reflects the hybrid condition of the modern immigrant but also raises important questions about cultural loss, adaptation, and the price of belonging.

Immigrants who were once colonized often continue to follow the ways of their former colonizers even after gaining independence. They begin to accept the new culture and sometimes try to dominate their own people by copying foreign ways. In this sense, they can still be seen as colonized, first by others, and now by themselves. This gives them a double identity. Nina is a good example of a colonized character. As a migrant, she finds it hard to fully adopt the new culture, but she also cannot completely hold on to her own culture in a foreign land. She struggles with the effects of colonial thinking and tries to understand what her true cultural identity is. This double colonization first external, then internal shows how deeply colonialism affects personal identity. Nina's confusion reflects the broader crisis many postcolonial individuals face, caught between two worlds yet not fully accepted by either. Her experience questions the idea of cultural freedom in a globalized world, where adopting a new identity often means losing part of the old one. The struggle is not just about adjusting to a new culture but also about reclaiming self-worth in a world shaped by colonial power structures. Nina's character becomes a powerful symbol of the emotional and psychological impact of migration and cultural displacement.

Immigrants often feel torn between two different cultures. They must choose whether to stay connected to their homeland's identity or adopt the new identity of the foreign land. If they accept the new culture, their native culture still stays with them. But if they continue following only their old culture, they may not feel comfortable or accepted in the new country. Many immigrants hope that moving to a new country will bring them happiness and a better life. At first, they may feel excited and full of hope.

Nina, like many immigrants, had high hopes for her life in Canada. She believed she would be happier than she was in India. But her first bitter experience as an immigrant happens right when she arrives in Toronto. At the immigration counter, she is asked to step aside while others pass through. She notices that white people avoid looking at her, while other people of color look at her with pity. Every document she carried is carefully checked, and her appearance is judged. She realizes that this kind of treatment does not happen to white women. In India, Nina was considered beautiful, but in this new land, her skin color becomes a reason for discrimination. These events slowly bring confusion and distress into her life. She is asked many unnecessary questions, and she becomes anxious and nervous during the entire process. Nina's experience at the immigration counter highlights the racial bias and systemic discrimination that many immigrants of color face, even before they

officially enter a new country. The scene marks the beginning of her cultural disillusionment. Her identity, which once gave her pride, now becomes a cause for discomfort and exclusion. The symbolic act of being told to “step aside” shows how immigrants are often placed on the margins of society. “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...She does not like her introduction to the new world” (106-107).

Ananda and Nina started their new life in a small apartment. She spends lonely days in the foreign land. It was a new life for Nina as there are “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). Instead of spending happy days, she mourns a lot as she is alone on the foreign land. She can’t find loneliness at her home in India. She recollects:

Till Nina came to Canada she hadn’t known what lonely meant. At home one was never really alone. The presence of her mother, the vendors who came to the door, the half hour gardener who watered their plants, the part time maid who washed and cleaned, the encounters with the landlady, all these were woven into her day. When she mourned her loneliness to Zenobai, it was a romantic companionate loneliness she was referring to, not the soul destroying absence of human beings from her life. She worried about her mother’s lack of companionship after marriage. (159)

Nina has a double identity because she is influenced by both her native culture and the new culture she faces in a foreign country. Like many immigrants, she compares the two cultures but finds it hard to decide which one is better. She struggles with the question of whether to accept or reject the new culture. In the end, she decides to adjust to the new way of life so she can survive in the new place. Manju Kapur writes: “These immigrants live in two minds. Outwardly they adjust well. Educated and English-speaking, they allow misleading assumptions about a heart that is divided” (120).

Having a double identity often leads to the creation of multicultural societies, which mostly come from large-scale migration or diaspora. Like Ananda, there are many immigrants today who move to countries like the US, UK, Canada, and Australia. Migration is usually a personal choice. Many people go abroad to get a better education or to earn more money. Immigrants often feel that the new country expects something from them, so they try hard to meet those expectations. That’s why they work sincerely and want to prove who they really are. The idea of a double identity reflects the complex emotional state of immigrants who carry the culture of their homeland while trying to adapt to a new one. This tension often becomes the seed of multicultural societies, where diverse traditions, languages, and lifestyles mix. However, behind this rich cultural blend lies the silent pressure to prove oneself.

Ananda and others like him represent the modern migrant who is constantly performing to fit in, to succeed, and to gain recognition. While the opportunity for growth exists in these new lands, so does the burden of expectations both from the host country and from their own communities back home. The desire to “show their identity” is not just about pride, but about earning respect and overcoming the stereotype of being an outsider.

Kapur in the novel says that “In the new country they work lengthy hours to get entrance into the system, into society, into establishing a healthy bank account. Years pass like this, ungrudged years because they can see their all sustaining dream of a better life coming true” (120). Immigrants often find themselves in a new place with a different culture and people who seem modern but emotionally distant and routine in their behavior. Some believe that if immigrants had worked hard and found opportunities in their own country, they wouldn’t have to leave home or struggle to find their identity in a foreign land. Chandra Sharat rightly expresses this sense of alienation beautifully in *Sari of the Gods*: “I leaped from one life to another, and in between lay noting but vacuum....we remain at large distant and clothed by our separate worlds. We know that the bonds we shared while growing up do not unite us anymore...In these new worlds, immigrants readjust and reinvent themselves, struggling to find their place in an alien landscape, netting some gains but also incurring deep emotional losses...” (7).

Another reason people migrate is that they feel proud when their children study in foreign countries like America or England. Many wealthy families send their children abroad for higher education. After completing their studies, these students usually don’t want to return home because they get good jobs and high salaries in those countries. It reflects the growing belief in society that success is measured by studying or settling abroad. Parents see foreign education not only as a path to better opportunities but also as a symbol of social status. Saying “my child is studying in America or England” becomes a matter of pride, often more than focusing on what the child learns or contributes. In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai precisely observes: “More people than ever before seem to imagine routinely the possibility that they or their children will live and work in places other than where they were born: this is the well-spring of the increased rates of migration at every level of social, national, and global life” (6).

Every immigrant slowly becomes like a foreigner because their new situation forces them to learn and adapt to everything around them. For example, countries that were once colonizers often continue to show their power even today. They forced their ideas and beliefs on the people they ruled, making them think and behave like the colonizers. The colonized people became dependent on foreign systems and rules, and rarely had the chance to think or live in their own way. In the same way, Nina feels completely confused about her identity. Nina represents the modern immigrant who lives between two mental worlds—one shaped by her homeland and the other by the influence of the foreign land. She is not just adjusting to a new culture; she is also carrying the invisible burden of a colonial mindset that has taught her to see Western ways as superior. This confusion is not just personal—it is historical and

psychological. “At present all she is, is a wife, and a wife is alone for many hours. There will come a day when even books are powerless to distract. When the house and its convenience can no longer completely charm and compensate. Then she realizes she is an immigrant for life” (122).

People who were colonized often easily accept the beliefs and ideas of the colonizers. As an immigrant, Nina is also forced to let go of her real name. In India, a person’s name is usually given based on religion, caste, or tradition. A name carries cultural and social meaning, it shows a person’s identity and background. Nina understands the deep connection between a name and a person’s identity. That’s why she feels uncomfortable when her husband asks her to call him “Andy” instead of his full name, Ananda. She refuses to do so. Nina’s refusal to call her husband “Andy” is more than just disliking a nickname; it is an act of resistance. It shows her unwillingness to erase her cultural roots for the sake of fitting in. Her stand reflects the inner conflict many immigrants face between adapting to a new world and staying true to who they are. “She had refused, it was foreign Christian western, and not to use the word Andy is not a Hindu name” (154).

People who were colonized often feel attracted to the dressing and lifestyle of the colonizers. The way we dress shows our personality, habits, likes, mood, and how we think or behave. In the novel, Nina stops wearing traditional Indian clothes like saris and salwars and starts wearing jeans and tops. But this change makes her feel uncomfortable and out of place. Nina’s discomfort with Western clothes shows her emotional disconnection from the culture she is trying to adopt. Traditional clothing is more than fabric—it represents cultural pride, memory, and belonging. When immigrants give it up to match new expectations, they often lose a part of themselves. “In all the time wearing salwar kameez no one had accosted her, but in jeans now she is accessible to the whole city...may be in time she will get used to think stiff material between her legs” (152). Men, who come from colonized countries, are habituated to wear the Western clothes. Men are colonized in their dressing style. Kapur in this novel mentions: “As immigrants fly across oceans they shed their old clothing, because clothes make the man and new ones help ease the transition. Men’s clothing has less international variation; the change is not so drastic. But those women who are not used to wearing western clothes find themselves in a dilemma. If they focus on integration, convenience and conformity they have to sacrifice habit, style and self-perception” (150). An immigrant goes through both a colonial mindset and cultural pressure. Even though the migrant works hard in a new country, they face many challenges. They often lose their identity in their own country before leaving, and they cannot fully gain a new identity in the foreign land. As a result, they spend their whole life searching for a clear sense of cultural identity. The loss of identity in one’s homeland often begins with economic or social reasons, but migration deepens that crisis. In the new land, they may be seen as outsiders, no matter how much they adapt. This results in a lifelong search for a sense of belonging that is often never fully achieved. Rushdie Salman in *Imaginary Homelands* says that “A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption. He loses his place, he enters into alien language, he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behavior and codes are unlike and sometimes even offensive to his own. And this is what makes a migrant such a pathetic

figure, because roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be human being” (277-278).

Like Nina and Ananda, all immigrants face problems with language, culture, traditions, values, and behavior. They often experience discrimination because of their skin color, race, language accents, or body language. The ideas of colonialism still live in the minds of some rulers, local people, and even some immigrants themselves. Because of this, immigrants struggle hard to find their true identity. There should be more global talks about how globalization and immigration affect both colonized countries and developed countries. The internalization of colonial ideas by both the rulers and the ruled creates a complicated identity crisis for immigrants. They not only have to deal with external discrimination but also struggle with their own feelings of self-worth and belonging.

Works Cited:

- Arjun, Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Chandra, G.S. Sharat. *Sari of the Gods*. Coffee House Press, 1998.
- Kapur, Manju. *The Immigrant*. Random House, 2008.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. Harper Collins, 2011.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. Grove, 1989.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*. Vintage, 2010.