

*'Not exactly like home': review of Manju Kapur, THE IMMIGRANT*

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Manju Kapur has already achieved a high degree of both critical and popular success, in India and abroad, as an admired exponent of Indian Writing in English (IWE), with her three previous novels, *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002) and *Home* (2006). *The Immigrant*, her fourth novel, in some ways observes continuity with its predecessors and in other ways breaks new ground. The Delhi-based novelist and lecturer (currently on sabbatical) at Delhi University's Miranda House College has by now won a reputation as a frank and sensitive chronicler of the lives of (generally Hindu) Indian middle-class or lower-middle-class families and, above all, their women members.

Temporally speaking, Kapur's territory has variously been today's India and – what is not the same thing – her country's recent past. If *A Married Woman* had a near-contemporary setting, while *Difficult Daughters* ushered its characters from pre-Independence days up to the time of writing and *Home* from the mid-60s to near to the present, *The Immigrant* here differs from all three in being located throughout in a period recent but not contemporary, the 1970s of Indira Gandhi's Emergency. Spatially, too, it represents a new departure: *Difficult Daughters* did not range outside the subcontinent, while in *A Married Woman* and *Home* the non-Indian world (the UK, the US) featured as vacation destinations and, in the former case, also as an academic mecca, but both narratives were set overwhelmingly in India. *The Immigrant*, by contrast and as its title suggests, divides its fictional locales between India and Canada (with a couple of excursions to the US), thus and despite the time-lag with the present locating India in the vexed context of globalisation with far greater emphasis than any earlier Kapur novel. Sociologically, and looking at the class and occupational backgrounds of the characters, if *Home* found Kapur exploring the (non-English-speaking) lives of people lower on the social hierarchy than the educated folk of her first two novels, here we are back in firmly middle-class territory, with characters' conditions ranging from the shabby-genteel to the nouveau riche but with educatedness, command of English and a certain international veneer always presumed. We may note, too, the closeness of some of the characters' experiences to the novelist's own world: Nina, the protagonist, is not only – like Pipeelika Khan in *A Married Woman* – a Miranda House graduate but a teacher at that college (indeed Nina's sister-in-law is a Miranda House alumna too), and her Canadian destination, Halifax in Nova Scotia, is a location where her creator herself has lived and studied.

The novel begins with the unmarried state of the thirty-year-old Nina, living with her widowed mother in a cramped Delhi apartment. Under maternal pressure, she accepts a semi-arranged marriage with Ananda, an NRI dentist in Halifax, abandons her teaching career and moves to Canada. The double process of adaptation, to her husband and to Canada, is long and painful. Nina joins a feminist support group and reads Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer; meanwhile, Ananda, who suffers from medical problems related to intimate functions, seeks alternative therapy in California. The therapy succeeds, but the outcome is not to strengthen the marriage but to undermine it: finally both partners, each unbeknown to the other, find themselves sucked into extramarital liaisons. Nina's ends disastrously but nonetheless coincides with her finding a new professional identity as a student of library science. The novel's conclusion is open-ended, with a Nina seemingly in process of change,

having been traumatised by her own affair and now finally aware – unknown to him – of her husband's – journeying away on a Greyhound bus towards what may prove a completely new life.

Kapur's book may, then, be placed in a by-now familiar tradition in the IWE sphere, as a novel about emigration and, specifically, Indians in North America, and readers and critics will not be lacking to match its merits against those of others in that mode. The title, incidentally, could refer either to Anand or Nina – the word 'immigrant' is applied to both, as noun or adjective, in the text (18, 110) – and is perhaps best taken as encompassing the experiences of both. It should immediately be stressed that Kapur's immigrants are, in both country of origin and host country, members of the university-educated, anglophone and cosmopolitan middle class; comparison with the migrants' world of unskilled hamburger-flippers, as in the American scenes of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, would not be of great relevance. This is, rather, an Indo-North American environment comparable to those traced out in Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*, or in the American part of Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*.

Retreading what might seem a well-blazed literary trail calls for a degree of individuation of theme, and Manju Kapur's principal success in this novel is to open out – almost, perhaps, to deconstruct – the whole notion of East-West encounter by, in the fine details of her writing, subtly calling in question any concept of 'Indianness' and 'Westernness' as watertight categories. The novel thus generates an indeterminate kind of hybridity that is neatly encapsulated in the moment soon after Nina's arrival when Ananda takes her to eat at the Taj Mahal, one of the few Indian restaurants in Halifax. To the cuisine of the Taj – 'chicken do piyaza, palak paneer, dal, raita, and naan' Nina reacts: 'Not bad, not bad at all. Not exactly like home, but distance blurred the distinction'; its 'photographs of exotic, touristy India', though, are 'as unfamiliar to Nina as to any other client' ('She wasn't the kind of Indian to respond to camels or colourful dancing girls'), while her husband admits he only comes there 'to bring friends who think that with me they should be eating Indian food' (141-142). The whole episode may serve as an emblem of the uncertain (though not illusory) 'Indianness' of the migrant couple.

Ananda arrives in Canada before Nina enters his life, and the novel thus narrates two overlapping processes of adaptation, his followed by hers. Both gradually convert from the strict vegetarianism of their upbringing to an omnivorous diet, and Nina finds herself doing the same with clothing, feeling unable to wear her saris (unsuited to the climate anyway) and eventually graduating from shalwar kameez to Western dress. In any case, neither has exactly come from the most traditional of Indian family backgrounds. Ananda had been preceded to Canada by an uncle, a doctor who married a Canadian; Nina's late father was a diplomat, and the family had at one point lived in Brussels. Nina's mother makes a point of stressing, when the two families first meet, how 'she too was once associated with international travel' (68). The marriage is arranged insofar as it arises through an astrologer and an introduction masterminded by Ananda's sister and Nina's mother; but it is voluntary in the sense that, once introduced, the couple embark on a long-distance relationship by airmail and phone. It could, indeed, be best described by the formula employed in the novel to express Ananda's viewpoint 'in the cities it was just arranged introductions' (85 – even if, significantly, Ananda feels unable to explain that nuance to his Canadian friends). In addition, Nina admits to ignorance of much of her own country when she lived there (in Delhi, her "Chinese" students from India's northeastern states had all looked the same to her – 'I swear I often couldn't distinguish between my northeastern students' - 141), and listening to a radio report of the

Kumbh Mela she finds herself ‘as much a stranger to [it] as anyone in Canada ... she had never had anything to do with ritual Hinduism’ (175). Anand’s musical tastes are Western – Beethoven’s Fifth is one of his favourites; Nina is a voracious reader, but her literary reference points are not Indian but Anglophone – E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence – and, in contrast to the key role played by the Ramayana in *A Married Woman*, barring a couple of references to the Bhagavad Gita there is scarcely any evocation in the entire book of the Indian philosophical or literary tradition.

Meanwhile if in this novel India is not perceived as a homogeneous entity, nor is ‘the West’: the California where Anand seeks therapy is more cosmopolitan and more liberal than Nova Scotia, and a metropolis like New York is an overwhelming experience dwarfing small-town Canada. Any notion of an undifferentiated ‘West’ is, surely, undermined in this narrative by the very choice of Canada, a country whose official philosophy is multiculturalism. Essentialist notions of ‘East’ and ‘West’ should, besides, also be undermined by the distancing effect of the novel’s location three decades before the time of writing – in other words, in another period altogether as far as both India and North America concerned. For all the contemporary raw nerves it may touch, this book is set in an era in some ways more liberal than the current period in the West, with its alternative therapeutic models and circulation of such notions as ‘open marriages ... no bonds but the voluntary’ (273) – and, equally, in what is all but a pre-IT era, when modernity meant such now quaint-seeming phenomena as microfilm technology, aerogrammes and operator long-distance calls.

The tension in the narrative between Indianness and global hybridity is reflected in the texture of the writing. As in Manju Kapur’s earlier novels, the book’s India-located portions are studded with unglossed, self-standing Indian words. Highly specific terms recur – ‘barat’ and ‘basti’, for instance, will be familiar to readers of *Home* and *A Married Woman* respectively. We also re-encounter the Kapur trademark of lexical lists, especially culinary: ‘She soaked dals and imli, she ground the walnuts for her special barfi, she fried namak para’ (52). Here, though, such lists are balanced by parallel ones of North American consumer goods: ‘Corn chips. Salt and vinegar chips. Onion and garlic dip. Mint and coconut chocolate. Cinnamon sweets. Buttery shortbread biscuits.’ (180). As Nina more and more ceases to identify with India, the lexical Indianisms – barring the rarity of a visit home – become thin on the ground; they reappear at her mother’s funeral (‘A small shamiana was spread in the lawn ... Ila ... sang two bhajans ... the pundit gave a small talk about death’ – 323), but that funeral itself appears almost as the sign of Nina’s letting go of any old, exclusively Indian self. Certainly Nina’s mother’s death marks Kapur’s dénouement here as highly different from that of an in some ways similar IWE novel like Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*, whose heroine, having lived in the US and been through an arranged marriage and an affair, returns to her veena-playing mother as if re-embracing her Indian woman’s identity.

The end of *The Immigrant* finds Nina heading out for a job interview at the University of New Brunswick, uncertain if she will return to her Halifax life or not. It feels, though, as if she is now ready to take control of her own destiny – ‘heading towards fresh territories, a different set of circumstances ... When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home’ (334). The reader may nonetheless fairly ask what is that Nina is reinventing herself as? Is she ceasing to be Indian, and if so, is she becoming Canadian or ‘Western’? - or Everywoman? – or, again, some kind of yet-to-be-defined global nomad? Given the creative tension between the novel’s setting and the time of writing, thirty years thence, *The Immigrant* can be read as an exploration of an initial phase of constitution of the globalised, hybrid identity today being assumed by increasing numbers of educated Indians – and, too, as evidence of what may now

be a major mutation going on within IWE, from a manifestation of the postcolonial to a new literature of the global.

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