

# A Postcolonial Eco-feminist study of hegemony in Manju Kapur's *Immigrant*

G.Alan<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT Chennai

## Abstract:

*Manju Kapur, a postcolonial feminist writer, is well known for her works like Home (2006), and The Immigrant (2008) which mirror the anguish of women in the male dominated society. This postcolonial novel, 'The Immigrant', captures the conflicts in the marital relationship between Ananda and Nina in the postcolonial context by comparing the value systems in Canada and India. This paper attempts to deconstruct the phallic-centric, hegemonic value system from the eco-feminist stand point by defining the role of marginalized women characters. The paper also deals with the eco-critical study of the connection between the physical landscape and the mental landscape in the novel. Similar to the possession of a land by the colonizers, the body of the woman is possessed by men in the postcolonial, eco-feminist perspective.*

## Keywords

*Eco-feminism, Post colonialism, Hegemony. Neo-colonialism.*

## 1. Introduction

This critical study proposes to analyze the psychology of the colonizer and the colonized in the colonial/neo-colonial era by identifying the hegemonical power structures. In the post colonial eco-feminist stand point, the body of the woman represents the colonized. The colonization in the neo-colonial era is not direct oppression; it is subtle and more dangerous than military control. Hence, the psyche of the oppressed woman is systematically studied in order to identify the hegemonic structures. Likewise, the colonizers are not just the white-skinned Europeans. In this postcolonial novel, Nina's husband behaves like a colonial agent. The conflict between the husband and the wife is similar to the struggle between the colonizer and the colonized. The body of the woman in postcolonial eco-feminist perspective is possessed like a strip of colonized

land. While describing the link between feminism and postcolonialism, John McLeod says, "The term 'patriarchy' refers to those systems-political, material and imaginative-which invests power in men and marginalize women. Like colonialism, patriarchy manifests itself in both concrete ways and at the level of imagination. It asserts certain representational systems which create an order of the world presented to individuals as 'normal' or 'true'. Also like colonialism, patriarchy exists in the midst of resistances to its authority." (McLeod 173)

Nina, the central character, is dislocated from her profession in India as a professor when she marries Ananda, a dentist from Canada. She experiences a deep sense of emptiness when she leaves her mother in India and travels to Canada for the first time after her wedding. The weather, the food and the strangers dislocate her from her own culture and gradually push her to become an immigrant in Canada. Ironically, her husband Ananda, shortened as Andy, feels located in Canada after losing his parents in an accident in India. After moving to his uncle's house at Halifax, Canada, he merges into the alien culture by disowning his own Brahmin culture by consuming alcohol and non-vegetarian food. Over a period of time, he begins to believe that Canada is better than India and plans to settle there permanently. Symbolically, he leaves India on 15th August to attain his independence from his native country. He also indulges in extra marital affairs in Canada to prove his potency to his wife.

The author begins the novel by describing Nina's absurd existence of traveling in a crowded bus, teaching to lazy students and longing for a right life-partner. Nina works as an English Professor at Miranda House University, Delhi. Her mother struggles to find the right life partner for her daughter in Delhi. The death of Nina's father at the age of forty five deeply affects the family. The submissive mother and her rebellious daughter move out of Lucknow and settle in Delhi. With reluctance,

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Nina celebrates her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday at home and college. The birthday reminds her of the waning youth and beauty. After the death of her father, Nina loses her faith in Hindu astrology and mocks at her mother's idea of consulting an astrologer for her marriage. The generation gap between the daughter and her mother is revealed in the conflict. She is also afraid of ending her life as a spinster in a college. Aging of Nina is depicted as a harsh reality in the novel. The author begins the novel with the description of Nina's age to depict the anxiety of a woman reaching almost thirty years. The desperation of an unmarried woman forces her to marry a stranger from Canada. Behind the fragile facade of marriage, Nina experiences the depression of an immigrant who longs to return to her own country. Although Nina's mother compares Ananda to her own husband, she realizes the futility of marrying her loving daughter to an insensitive Indian in Canada.

The author expresses her anguish as "Would she end up a bitter old spinster like Miss Kapoor of the Economics department, like the Misses Hingorani and Rao of her own, like Miss Lal of History or Miss Krishnamurthy of Sanskrit? Academics was full of spinsters, minatory signposts to depressing, lonely futures" (Kapur 3).

## **2. The Immigrant Experience in the Neo-colonial context**

Nina faces the immigrant experience for the first time at Toronto Airport when she travels alone three months after her wedding. She is dejected to see the fair treatment given to white-skinned people at the airport when an officer treats her like an illegal immigrant in Canada. Ananda's rosy picture of Canada gets shattered at the airport. In spite of having a fair complexion, she is treated like a third world citizen in Canada. The immigration officer questions her about the details related to her marriage. Nina answers the questions politely and describes the immigration room as a jail. In the airport, she mentally compiles notes to Ananda for deceiving her in Canada. The notes are a mental projection of her painful experience at the immigration office. While describing the sensibility of women, Ashutosh Dubey and Vibha Singh Tomar observe, "In Indian context, woman is quintessentially an immigrant. She is continuously

displaced, and the process of being uprooted and rerooted is her predicament" (Dubey and Tomar, 19)

The personal tragedy in the lives of Nina and Ananda creates a deep sense of emptiness in both their lives. In Ananda's case, the death of his parents instills guilt on his mind and he associates the tragedy with his karma. Ever since the demise of his parents, Ananda's sister becomes very possessive on her brother. Similarly, Nina's mother also develops a possessive love on her daughter after the death of her husband. In both their lives, the death of their loved ones changes their lives forever. Unable to bear the loss of his parents, Ananda leaves India in order to get rid of his painful memories. Change of place ensures peace of mind and promises hope for Ananda, whereas in Nina's case, Canada does not ensure happiness and peace. The past life of Ananda in India haunts his present life in Canada. Mainly, the political instability threatens the present life of Ananda. The author fuses the painful past memories of Ananda and Nina along with the uncertain future in Canada to create a postmodern hybrid space. From a feminist point of view, the novelist has captured the trauma of a modern Indian woman who suffers from dislocation and alienation in Canada. Although Nina is physically located in Canada, her mind longs to travel back to India.

## **3. Identifying the Neo-Colonial Hegemonical Structures**

The novel is indeed a critique on human sexuality. Through her candid description of sex, the author comments on the impotency of the central, male character in the novel. This postcolonial novel captures the conflicts in the marital relationship between Ananda and Nina in a simple language. By juxtaposing eroticism with the absurdity of human existence, the author blends the personal and private lives of the couple in the novel. Sexual dominance and hegemony runs throughout the text. Nina becomes not only an immigrant in the foreign land, she becomes an outsider in physical intercourse. The powerlessness of Ananda is expressed through his impotency. The impotent colonizer uses different strategies to colonize Nina. According to Ashok Kumar: "Manju Kapur in *The Immigrant* has discussed the two aspects which are important in man-woman relationship. First is sexual aspect and second is psychological aspect. But it is the sexual



aspect which overpowers the psychological aspect” (Kumar 64).

The author describes Nina’s premarital relationship with Rahul, fifteen years older than her in a casual tone. The relationship breaks when Nina expects him to marry her. The painful relationship, unknown to her mother, shatters her peace of mind and makes her a loner. The bitter relationship turns her into a skeptic towards marriage. Loneliness results from the relationship in the past. Commenting on Nina’s emptiness, her mother blames the karma of women who are destined to live a miserable life without men. The unpleasant memories of Nina’s past haunt her present life at Delhi and refrains her from marrying a stranger. With doubt and disbelief, she ventures into the next stage of marriage and commitment by yielding to her mother’s wishes. The author compares and contrasts the views of a modern woman with a traditional woman by narrating and describing the lives of Nina and her mother.

Marriage as a social institution fails to unite the lives of Nina and Ananda. Both Ananda and Nina indulge in extra marital relationship to assert their respective sexual freedom in Canada. Nina and Ananda question the sanctity of Indian marriage in Canada. The author compares the traditional Indian values with the modern Canadian values. Ananda suffers from sexual dysfunction and impotency and tries to treat his ailment without informing his wife. His obsession with sexual fulfillment indicates his interest in physically dominating his wife. Throughout her stay in Canada, Nina becomes a passive observer in the sexual intercourse. The author describes her detached interest in physical intercourse by highlighting the monotony involved in physical relationship. Gradually, Nina feels a sense of alienation in her bed room. The intimate desires of a woman are not encouraged in the male dominated society. The novelist has problematized the plight of the woman from a Third world country in Canada. Here, Spivak’s views on feminism practiced in First world countries and Third world countries are appropriated by the author. The experience of the women in Third world countries is described as double colonization in the postcolonial context.

The change of place does not ensure freedom to Nina. Though she is physically placed in Canada, her mind psychologically moves towards India

whenever she faces difficulty in marriage. Nina’s frustration with marriage forces her to indulge in an extra marital affair with Anton. Like her premarital affair in India, her extra marital affair in Canada turns unpleasant when Anton physically assaults her in bed. While commenting on Manju Kapur’s theme of immigration, Bina Agarwal argues, “She promotes the idea that woman being the custodians of culture and morality suffer a greater loss of her autonomy and identity in trans-cultural spaces. Immigration leads to a serious impact on their psyche” (Agarwal, 84).

The novelist has expressed the sexuality of an Indian woman through the character of Nina. She has brought to light the crisis faced by Nina after meeting Rahul, Anton and Ananda. The body of a woman is possessed by the male characters in the novel. Nina recollects her premarital relation with Rahul in India and feels guilty for not marrying him. Later in her post martial stage, unable to bear the impotency of her husband, she develops an affair with Anton in Canada. Her relationship with Anton fails as he tries to rape her. The author reiterates the point that the body of a woman is treated as a sexual object by men throughout the novel. The condition of reducing woman as an object is followed not only in India but also in Canada. The male dominated society has seldom offered space for women to express their sexuality. Furthermore, Nina’s bruised body becomes a metaphor in the novel. According to Arpita Ghosh, “Over and over again in her bodily desires, she is trapped and devastated. The consequences are never in terms with satisfaction on part of a woman. At the end of the day she is left defenceless submitting before the lusty thirst of her male counterpart. Man has repeatedly taken advantage of her anatomical weakness and forced her to oblige to his desires” (Ghosh, 129). The novelist has successfully captured the violence against women in the postmodern society. The novel traces the traumatic experience of an Indian woman by comparing and contrasting the Indian value system with the Western value system.

#### 4. Postcolonial Eco-Feminist Resistance

In the postcolonial context, Ananda loses his interest in his own Indian name and forces Nina to call him as Andy. This indicates that Ananda is not rooted in Indian culture. Besides that, he calls his wife as

“baby”. Nina resists the influence of Canadian culture by refusing to call her husband as Andy and remains connected to her own culture. Ananda assimilates the western culture, where as Nina resists the western domination. In the postcolonial context, the author has used many Indian words and expressions in her description of Indian customs in Canada. Indian words like salwar kameez, dal, beta, naan are found in the novel. Anupama Chowdhuri comments upon the postcolonial aspects of the novel as: “A distinctly Indian lexicon is transfused with International Standard English to bring out the essence of familiarity for the Indian readers” (Chowdhury 106).

The novel predominantly deals with two kinds of landscapes: Canadian and Indian. In postcolonial eco-feminist perspective, Nina represents the colonized India and Ananda stands for the colonial west. The male-dominated west uses sexual politics to dominate the other. Although, Canada offers employment to Indians, the central woman character feels like an alienated immigrant. The powerless body of Nina functions as an important metaphor throughout the novel. Nina’s body is crushed mercilessly by Rahul, Ananda and Anton. The disempowered Nina is not connected to the western value system in Canada. The Canadian landscape stands for the dominating western hegemonical system which tries to control women. On the other hand, from eco-feminist view, Indian landscape ensures safety for Nina.

## 5. Conclusion

The novel begins with the anxiety of Nina in India and ends in her self-discovery in Canada. Finally, Nina decides to resist against the male-centric, Canadian value system by discovering her true self by being rooted in postcolonial Indian value system. The psychology of the neo-colonial agents like Rahul, Ananda and Anton indicate the fact that dominance still exists in the psyche of the colonizers. The novel is indeed the conflict between the colonizer and the colonized in the neo-colonial terms. The aggressive male characters represent the colonizers and the fragile Nina represents the colonized. Their respective bodies and landscapes stand for the ecological and physical rift between Canadian and Indian value systems.

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