

Marriage And Motherhood As The Summon Bonum Of Woman's Life In The Immigrant (2008) By Manju Kapur
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Abstract

Manju Kapur is a feminist writer who raises important social issues concerning women. Marriage and motherhood are the two much-talked-about subjects in her fictional world. In The Immigrant, Nina, the protagonist of the novel, is chiefly worried about these twin problems of any girl in a patriarchal society. She is around thirty and is a lecturer of English at Miranda House in Delhi, yet she is still unmarried. Her unmarried status is a cause of concern for everybody including herself. Ultimately, she is married to Ananda who is a dental surgeon in Canada. As marriage is sine qua non for motherhood, soon after her marriage, Nina wishes to become a mother. For that purpose, she exhorts her husband to go for the fertility test, and she herself also consults a sex therapist in order to realize her cherished dream. But, unfortunately, she cannot become a mother, although, like marriage, motherhood is the summon bonum of a woman's life.

Keywords

Immigrant, Feminist, Patriarchal, sine qua non, Cherished, Summon Bonum, Exhort.

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Marriage and motherhood are the oldest and the most sacred institutions in the Indian social setup. A woman finds fulfillment in marriage and motherhood. The parents feel relieved and satisfied when their daughter is suitably married. In a patriarchal society, it is the achme of parental duties. If a daughter is timely married to a well-to-do family, the parents feel blessed. *Manusmrti*, one of the oldest treatises on the Hindu ethics, comments on this necessity of the parental duties, “Reprehensible is the father who gives not (his daughter in marriage) at the proper time”, (*Manusmrti* 373) and Manju Kapur has faithfully depicted this Indian psyche in her novels.

At the outset of the novel, *The Immigrant*, Nina, the protagonist is near about thirty. She lives with her widowed mother Shanti at Jangpura Extension in Delhi. She is a lecturer of English at Miranda House College, but her unmarried status is a major cause of worry for herself as well as to her mother. Being worried, the protagonist herself questions her unmarried state. Nina says, “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?” (*The Immigrant* 3) Such statements of Nina depict her agony of being unmarried even at thirty. The novelist also remarks in this regard, “The major topic of conversation in the last eight years had been Nina’s marriage – who, when, where, how?” (*The Immigrant* 3)

Like Jane Austen’s novels, there is a husband-hunting campaign in the novels of Manju Kapur. When Nina’s marriage could not take place as her Mother had planned, she reverts to the traditional method of consulting an astrologer. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar comments about this peculiar ancient trait of Indians who have to face the difficulties of the modern ways of life, “The traditional method of ‘arranging’ marriages after comparing the horoscopes of boy and girl, and taking into consideration family, status, caste, relative affluence and future prospects uneasily survives still, but it has had to make terms with unpredictable new forces like ‘love at first sight (that might ignore caste, class and race barriers) and the phenomenon of devil-may-care ‘free love.’” (Iyengar 453)

As an educated girl, Nina does not believe in astrology because an astrologer had pronounced “achievement, success and happiness” (*The Immigrant* 4) for her father, but he died all of a sudden due to cardiac arrest. However, her mother’s enthusiasm for astrologers does not lessen, and she invites a government servant–cum-astrologer to predict about the marriage of her daughter. After knowing the educational background of Nina, the astrologer makes a ridiculous pronouncement. He tells, “Marriage would take place this year or the next, went on the astrologer. Journeys were involved, and the signs were good for prosperity and happiness.....

Things are not easy if you are educated, the mind needs companionship, and the search becomes longer". (*The immigrant* 12)

The prophecy of the astrologer proves partially true as there was every possibility of the marriage of Nina and Ananda. Ananda's sister Alka played a key role in bringing about this match. At the prospect of Nina's marriage to Ananda, Shanti "looked positively bridal as the weight of Nina's thirty years lifted from her heart". (*The Immigrant* 79) Shanti was so much elated at this prospect of marriage that she equated Ananda with her late husband, and there was no possibility of getting a better match for Nina than Ananda. The novelist writes, "Nina's mother was so moved that she decided that Ananda was a replica of her late husband. There was that same dynamism, that same forward-looking quality that led him to emigrate, that same traditional streak that induced him to come home for a bride. A rare and unusual mix of Indian and Western. Who could ask for more?" (*The Immigrant* 72-73).

After the solution of the problem of marriage, there arises the problem of Nina's motherhood. At the beginning of the novel, Nina, as well as her mother, both were worried about how Nina would be suitably married, but within a year of her marriage, Nina was deeply concerned about her pregnancy. Motherhood is one of the highest aspirations of womankind. *Manusmrti* also states that motherhood is the highest function of womankind, "The production of children, the nurture of those born, and the daily life of men, (of these matters) woman is visibly the cause." (*Manusmrti* 378) She requests her husband to consult a sex therapist to know the cause of her barrenness, and also exhorts him to do the same for him. Although Ananda was suffering from some sexual inadequacies also, yet it was not so alarming. In her enthusiasm to have children, Nina visits a gynecologist singly who advises her to come as a couple. Goaded by Nina's visit, Ananda also goes for sex therapy in California in the USA under the pretext of attending a dental conference.

After Ananda's return from California, there was a marked change in his sexual behavior. Nina was at a loss to understand why her husband was behaving so strangely. Ananda tells her the truth about his visit but it raised doubts in Nina's mind about the marital fidelity of her husband. Nina doubts that he might have taken a surrogate wife in order to undergo sex therapy. It led to frequent altercations between the two. In the meantime, Nina got a part-time job in a library, where she met Beth who was doing her Master's degree in Library Science. Nina joins the support group started by Beth which was based on feminine principles. In this group, women discussed their intimate problems to find out their solutions. Nina raises her

personal problems of, “Her inability to conceive or Ananda’s going to California without telling her?” (*The Immigrant* 215) In intense agony, Nina adds, “All her expectations of marriage and her future had been bound up in motherhood”. (*The Immigrant* 215)

The support group meets at regular intervals to sort out the problems which women face in general. As Nina rises to speak, she becomes thoroughly personal. She complains about her loss of her job, and her inability to conceive. She says, “I used to be a teacher, in fact, I taught for ten years before I came here. And now I do nothing. I have not even been able to conceive”. (*The Immigrant* 229) Motherhood had become an obsession to her, and she regards her barrenness as a failure to fulfill her primary duty. Assuaging Nina’s feelings, Gayatri, her co-counselor, agrees with the traditional view that “We are conditioned to think a women’s fulfillment lies in birth and motherhood, just as we are conditioned to feel failures if we don’t marry.” (*The Immigrant* 230) Nina remains depressed because of her uncertain future. At this juncture, her husband hands her over the report of his sperm test, but she remains emotionless. He accuses Nina of losing interest in having child. At this taunt, she retorted, “I could never lose interest in our child”. (*The Immigrant* 233)

Not only Nina but her mother Shanti also is much worried about Nina’s barrenness. Nina tells Ananda that her mother keeps inquiring about children. When Nina visits India after residing with her husband in Canada, she requests her mother to accompany her in order to get rid of the hardships which she was facing in Delhi. Shanti replied that I would accompany you when you would be having children. Nina asks, “Why are you obsessed with children?” (*The Immigrant* 256) Nina also tells her mother about her plan to get a job first. At this, her mother abruptly remarks, “Job can wait, children can’t”. (*The Immigrant* 286) It shows, as Shanti was worried about the marriage of her daughter, so was she worried about her motherhood; because through marriage a woman meets her soulmate, and motherhood alleviates her loneliness and helps to settle in an alien atmosphere.

After returning from India and joining her husband in Canada, Nina again reverted to her earlier obsession with having children. Ananda advises her to wait till she finishes her studies. But Nina was impatient to have children as early as possible. She tells her husband, “I can be pregnant and still study. There is someone in my class who has had a baby”. (*The Immigrant* 295) Nina was in her mid-thirties, her youth was slipping and she felt insecure without children. She was preparing for her career as a librarian, yet at the home front, she was lonely and needed children besides her husband. But, unfortunately, despite her best efforts Nina remains issueless till the end of the novel.

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