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A Thematic Study of Manju Kapur's Novels:  
*Home and The Immigrant*  
V. Thenmozhi, M.A., M.Phil.

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Manju Kapur Courtesy: [www.untitledbooks.com](http://www.untitledbooks.com)

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## **Introduction**

Manju Kapur is the most talked about and appreciated contemporary Indian English woman novelist. She insists that the world she portrays analytically in her novels stems from the intellectual experience of her academic life. Her basic approach is to liberate women from the oppressive measures of patriarchy. The protagonists in her novel therefore, endure physical, emotional and psychological suffering, but finally are able to attain their long cherished freedom to a great extent.

## **Portrayal of Women**

Manju Kapur's women are portrayed within the periphery of their respective territories subject to gender prejudice and oppressed to the level of giving up individual identity. A self-effacing and selfless living is thrust upon women, acclimatizing them to gender prejudice and willing accepting of their present situation. In all her novels Manju Kapur places emphasis on the cultural conditioning of the girl child in an Indian setup. From a social and psychoanalytic angle, she explores the manner in which Indian girls are moulded to suit the needs and imperatives of a patriarchal society. While most novels dealing with feminist issues begin with the problems affecting the marital life of an urban educated woman, the novels of Manju Kapur trace the painful voyage of the heroines from childhood into adulthood. The manner in which myth, religious dogma and tradition are used to curb a woman's freedom and stifle her natural impulses to live and grow as men do, and the manner in which her education and career are intentionally delimited to deprive her of freedom from dependency are revealed as the two powerful social forces that impede the development of the Indian female child.

## **Personification of New Women**

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The women in the novels of Manju Kapur seem to be the personification of new women who have been carrying the burden of inhibition since ages and want to be free now. Manju Kapur clearly shows the dilemma of women who carry the burden of being female as well as the added responsibility of being mothers to members of their own sex. In the traditional social milieu of the novel where mothers and daughters exist, marriage is regarded as the ultimate goal and destiny from which these women cannot escape. Manju Kapur succeeds in presenting the real picture of women in a male- dominated society. Her female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individuals caged within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking and makes them intolerant of family and society. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunge into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds. Manju Kapur has portrayed her protagonists as women caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and the yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day.

### **Away from Traditional Portrayals of Women**

Manju Kapur's novels present the changing image of women moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self sacrificing women towards self assured, assertive and ambitious women who make society aware of their demands. The novel *Home* depicts how family norms are ignored by the new generation of women.

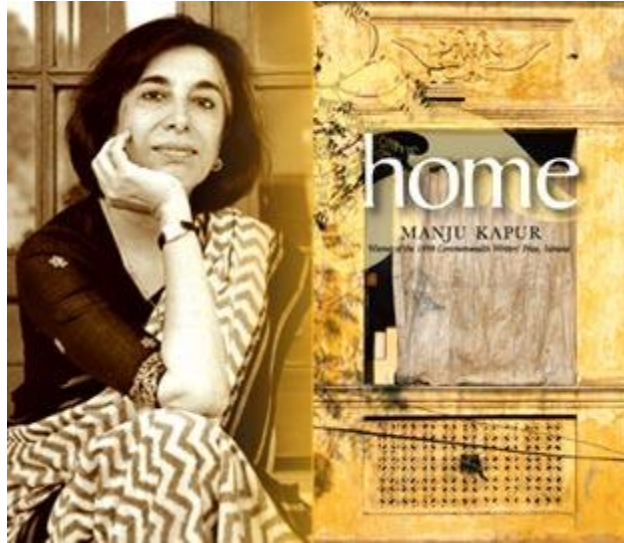
### **Role of women in *Home***

Manju Kapur's novel *Home* is about the joint family. With unswerving attention, Kapur follows the members of this traditional family into the uneasy world they come to inhabit.

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From the frantic sensory of modern urban India, she constructs a story as intricate, quiet and dazzling as the fabric produced by the family. Told in a sustained colloquial voice, *Home* is startling in its sweep and unerringly accurate in the bleakness and hope it presents. An extensive investigative work, *Home* is a holistic venture to decipher characters of a family that speak as one voice to the world. Within the house each individual voice may chatter, murmur, question or complain, but they all must eventually fall silent in deference to the wishes of the family as a whole.

### **In Conflict with Patriarchal or Sexist Society**

Manju Kapur places her female protagonist in conflict with a patriarchal or sexist society with prejudices on the basis of gender, and depicts her struggle to assert her individuality and gain acceptance. Though the focus is mainly on the suffering of a woman within marriage, yet there are substantive instances where a woman's life is moulded along sexist lines to be a much lesser, certainly not an equal to a patriarch within the family. Through characters, like Rupa,

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Sona and later Nisha, the novelist emphasizes the point that a woman is not born ‘as a miserable creature’ but is culturally moulded to be so and this process is initiated by woman herself. The power of suppression therefore is by a woman against another, as Sona does against Nisha. This affirms the derivative that gender is not based upon biology or anatomy, but entirely on the cultural notions established by the patriarchal civilization. This privileges man over woman and enhances the state of inequality and incompatibility, causing master-slave relationship.

### **Impact of Family Web on Sona**

The family web that enmeshes and stifles the existence of a woman deprives her of and denies her the opportunity to express herself. Sona, blessed by all materialistic riches is mentally tortured by her mother-in-law because of her barrenness and her ‘mean’ birth. Her dedication to her family and her passive suffering is used further as a commodity to torture her. Her craving for peace and recognition is not even properly heard by her husband, who leaves her alone with her thoughts.

### **Contrast between Sona and Rupa**

Sona is beautiful and married to a rich business man also, but unhappy because she is childless even after ten years of marriage and forced to take care of Vicky. Rupa is barren like Sona but she relates herself to her family and career in order to establish her identity. She even becomes an anchor to Nisha, who when struggling passively against the physical violence of her cousin Vicky, retreats into self alienation. Not able to push back the threatening force of Vicky, Nisha becomes an outsider in her own family. So pitiable is the state of living for her that she fails to communicate to her mother and suffers agony single-handed. Rupa suspects “problem” through her body language and shelters her by playing the role of foster mother to her. First,

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through Rupa and later through Nisha, Kapur advocates the strategies that can be adopted for the welfare of women. Rupa realizes her creative spirit, and thereby forges ahead into her future. Likewise Nisha, who after her skin problem realizes her status as an outsider and establishes a boutique and thereby overcomes her feeling of inadequacy, Rupa and Nisha are thereby effective substitutes to their husbands' "provider"- role and this adds to their prowess. By fighting against encroachments to their existence and esteem they hold their attitude to recognizable pride. Sona represents reconciliation to oppressive domestic forces while Nisha and Rupa fight to achieve their psychic spontaneity. Nisha and Rupa create their own contributory environments where their basic intellectual and material needs for survival and development are safeguarded.

### **Nisha and Her Motherhood**

Nisha's marriage and later her motherhood assert the fact that a woman's intellectual emancipation does not negate her biological stature of nurturing various relationships. Kapur is not argumentatively vocal in pleading the fate of the contemporary woman, rather she sympathetically paints woman's struggle to find an identity outside these definitions, which men have designated for women.

### **Description of Personality Traits**

In *Home* with two different portraits of women with Rupa and Nisha on the one side and Sona on the other, Kapur projects the seemingly opposite personality traits, yet striking in refinement and polished. While carrying a melancholic vacuum of heart, Nisha and Rupa fulfill their social obligations like Sona, but unlike Sona they strive to seek a definite valuation of their personality and performance. Their professions are an expression of this image and a shadow of

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their creative vision. Their endeavour looks beyond their sense of emptiness. Their self-preservation enables them to preserve their individuality in a world of pre-fixed norms and behaviour. The journey of both Nisha and Rupa is from non-entity to entity, whereas Sona remains a non-entity. Rupa and Nisha make a conscious attempt to represent the suppressed urge of women to assert their quest for independence in a concrete manner.

### **Mother-Daughter Relationship**

The mother-daughter relationship has reversal connotations. A mother takes her daughter as her daughter and saddles her child with her own destiny. Nisha's rejection by her mother is symbolic of Sona's rejection of the suppressed self. Sona feels elated and elevated in her rank with the birth of Raju her second born. Marginalizing Nisha, Sona marginalizes her ungratified existence. To Sona, therefore, Raju is an ultimate panacea, but to Nisha is the cause of the gender bias. Sona's nonchalant attitude is juxtaposed with Rupa-Nisha relationship to bring out the inherent ambivalence.

### **Presence of Mother-in-Law**

Nisha's attitude towards her mother-in-law after her marriage to Arvind, a widower, is another instance of ambivalence. With an intention to rule over her feminine universe as a wife, she callously accommodates the old lady. By distancing her existence in the small house Nisha strategically tries to assert her autonomy. This repulsiveness disappears when twins are born to her. Nisha surrenders her non-conformist attitude, for she needs the assistance of the old lady to look after her children. Her surrender is symbolically transmitted when she places her son on the lap of her mother-in-law and holds the girl child to herself at the naming ceremony. In the saga

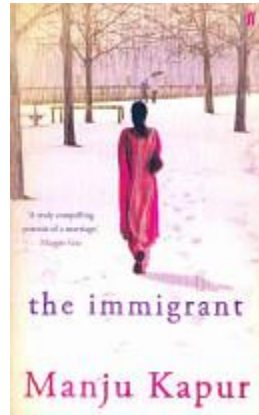
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of the traditional Indian business family in *Home*, Kapur displays a mature understanding of the female psyche.

### Hybrid Identity in *The Immigrant*



Manju Kapur's fourth novel *The Immigrant* gains clarity and perspective not only from its objective assessment of immigration, but also because the story is set in the 1970s. By returning to an era when to leave one's home was to relegate it to the past, Kapur throws into contrast today's more fluid migrant identities, hybridized by the ways in which technology, affordable airfares and sheer weight of numbers, keep aspects of the old society alive in the new.



### Changes in Vision and Various Relationships of Women

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*The Immigrant* is about a woman and the changes in her vision and various relationships in this speedily changing world. Nina the protagonist is unmarried till her thirtieth birthday. Her relations with her widowed mother, her late marriage, her turning from a meek wife to a daring woman, and her valiant rejection of the mechanical relationship with her dentist husband are the main concerns of the story. The story of *The Immigrant* is set in the 70's and revolves around the protagonist Nina who is a thirty year old English Lecturer in Miranda college, New Delhi, struggling to make both ends meet, for herself and her widowed mother. But her pursuit is as useless as to search for water in the arid soil and as a result, her fragile new life begins to unravel.

### **Exploring the Arranged Marriage System**

The novel explores, through Nina's story, not only the arranged marriage system and sexual compatibility between individuals, but the clashes between western and eastern culture, the wrenching of family ties when people immigrate, and India's regimented class system versus the more relaxed social set up of the west. The novel unfolds many currents of view and streams of people who are just puppets in the hands of fate as many Indians believe. A human being is seen as a victim of circumstances.

### **A New Life in a Foreign Country, Canada**

*The Immigrant* follows the lives of two Indians making a new life in Canada, and the trials and tribulations of their marriage. In subject matter and locale the focus shifts from India to Canada but at its core, the novel deals with man-woman relationship. The theme of revolt and rehabilitation of woman has been placed in an alien set up. But in the novel there is no east-west

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clash or the theme of alienation. The novel *The Immigrant* begins with the clenching impact of patriarchy where the social and gender constructs haunt Nina and she is finally reconciled to marry Ananda, an Indian immigrant in Halifax. Her marriage stands as a matter of convenience and chance as her prospects of settling down and having a family of her own seem to pressure her on her thirtieth year. So the exile for Nina involves the act of crossing borders due to an imminent crisis in her personal life, on her status of belonging in her homeland. Her migration is caused by an act of the tradition-bound status consciousness.

### **Reasons for Migration**

Ananda's decision to move out from his home to Canada is for security, safety, and the construction of an identity. Ananda and Nina fail to establish a healthy sexual intimacy which stays at the level of verbal discourse and which leaves their marriage under tremendous strain. The textualization of immigrant experience is seen as Nina suffers from a profound loneliness, when Ananda fails to please her sexually. She finds herself vulnerable and forlorn which make her a prime target for the lust of Anton.

### **Return to the Home Land**

The novel traces how Nina returns to her homeland in an effort to establish links to her past and as an aid to boost her emotional and psychological support systems. But the death of her mother breaks Nina's last ties with her homeland and symbolically her "old self". She faces the faults of her marriage, defies the role that tradition has scripted for her, and qualifies as a librarian. She has lost plenty along the way, but she finds herself when she boards a Greyhound bus bound for another new start. Nina's dream of a happy married life end on a sour note and she

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is surging ahead with the hope of establishing herself independently on her own in an alien country. Nina's new struggle for her survival is seen from the existentialistic angle also. She is like a wandering ship after a storm that tries to find a safe place for anchoring.

### **Consequences of Migration in Personal Lives**

Manju Kapur, through her captivating prose, brings an end to *The Immigrant* by establishing the fact that both Ananda and Nina lacked the mental strength of an immigrant. Immigration definitely calls for willingness of the mind to assimilate, adapt oneself to the foreign ethos without abandoning their old selves. For Ananda and Nina their displacement was not only geographical and cultural, but also spiritual and that ultimately made them lose their own selves. Nina and Ananda inhabit an in-between space that they themselves are all too aware of. In some ways it is an enabling space, but in some ways it also means that they are fixed in a time warp that traps them. Manju Kapur explores thoroughly these aspects of settling abroad.

### **Conclusion**

Manju Kapur's novels enable the readers to get an idea of the feminist struggle against biases. Striking a balance between a natural co-existence on the one hand and unfettered freedom and space on the other, Kapur's eloquent narration of women's issues is quintessentially, both Indian and universal.

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