

Crossing the Borders: Resonating Memories and Homing in Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*

Dr. Priya T

Assistant Professor & Coordinator
Centre for French
Bharathidasan University
Trichy - 620 024
Tamil Nadu, India
priya.t@bdu.ac.in



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Abstract

Diaspora has been defined as the voluntary or involuntary dispersion of a social or ethnic group. Home signifies a dwelling and the structures of family and friends. There exists a nexus between migration and home. Diaspora connotes a process of estrangement and detachment from home which evokes images of trauma. The diasporic members experience a sense of loss of the homeland and a sense of alienation in the hostland. The dislocation fetches isolation, cultural conflicts and nostalgia for home. Memories are crucial to diasporic identity and bridge the gap between the past and the present. To resist assimilation to the host country, the migrants attempt to revive and recreate their religious, cultural and linguistic practices.

This paper draws from the theories of Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah and Paolo Boccagni and attempts to reestablish a sense of home and grounding for the Indian diaspora in the host country. *The Immigrant* revolves around the immigrant experiences from the perspective of a woman Nina who shifts to the environs of Canada following her courtship with Ananda, a dentist in Halifax. Ananda gets assimilated to the Canadian culture thanks to his endurance whilst Nina is alienated and torn between the two different cultures. Memories provide sustenance to Nina in the new atmosphere. Owing to her attachment to the homeland, Nina reintegrates her Indian cultural traditions in the Canadian setting. She asserts her belongingness, recreates a sense of home in the foreign soil and reconstructs her Indian cultural identity.

Keywords: Manju Kapur, *The Immigrant*, Diaspora, alienation, nostalgia, memories, home, reconnections, identity

Diaspora has been historically associated with the dispersal and collective exile of the Jews. Robin Cohen labels these refugee groups as victim diaspora. This is followed by the imperial diaspora when the British and the French colonial powers were in pursuit of their colonial empires. During the colonial era, one can trace the labour diaspora when the Indentured Indians crossed the borders of the Indian Ocean in search of economic opportunities. This is categorized as the *Kala Pani* crossings. Chinese, Japanese and Italians were also part of the labour diaspora or proletarian diaspora. Trade diaspora refers to the displacement of Indians, Chinese, Japanese and Lebanese for trade and business endeavours. Cohen contends that though these migrant groups belong to different diasporas, they exhibit a collective memory of their homeland and a sense of loss and exile in the host country. Rajesh Rai and Peter Reeves state:

A diaspora exists precisely because it remembers the ‘homeland’. Without this memory..., these migrants and settlers would be simply people in a new setting, into which they merge, bringing little or nothing to the new ‘home’, accepting in various ways and forms the mores and attitudes that already exist in their new country and society ... The people of the diaspora, however, do not merely settle in new countries: they recreate in their socio-economic, political and cultural institutions a version of ... that homeland that they remember. (2006, p.18)

Increasingly, during the last three decades of the twentieth century, there has been a steady flow of highly skilled and professional migrants to the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. They constitute the Non-Resident Indians. These NRIs changed the nature of the diaspora and brought high levels of skill and entrepreneurial flair to their new hostlands.

While migrating to different destinations, the South Asians have carried with them the social, religious and cultural practices of the homeland (Rai, Reeves 2009: p.3).

Theories of Diaspora, Cultural Identity and Homing

To begin with, I propose to examine the theories of diaspora, cultural identity and Homing. I will draw in particular from the theoretical writings of Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah and Paolo Boccagni.

Cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging to a particular group based on various cultural categories including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender and religion. Cultural identity is established through a process of sharing and understanding traditions, language, class, norms and customs. In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall, a sociologist and cultural theorist, defines cultural identity “in terms of a shared culture [...] that people with a common history and ancestry share. [...], our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’ [...] with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (p.223). The forced dispersion, the traumatic experiences, the memory of the motherland, the lack of integration into the new cultural space, the quest for return and the connection with the homeland are the key elements of diaspora. Torn between displacement and relocation, there is a paramount need for the diaspora to reconstruct diasporic identity.

Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity is a matter of “becoming as well as being” (p. 225). Hall examines two ways of reflecting about cultural identity. In Hall’s first approach, identity is seen as fixed or stable. He posits that cultural identity reflects common historical experiences and shared cultural codes that reinforce a sense of unity. He interprets cultural identity as a unifying element that holds a certain group of people together. In his second approach, he describes cultural identity as a process that evolves constantly. Stuart Hall emphasizes that diasporic identities are those “which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (p. 235). Cultural identity is constructed through a constant transformation that is not fixed but its past experiences are deeply rooted. He declares that cultural identity is a continuous process of “becoming” as well as “being”.

While reflecting on diaspora and cultural identity, we understand that there are two key concepts that are pertinent: home and belonging. Home is the place where one feels comfortable and safe.

In *Home and away: Narratives of migration and estrangement*, Sara Ahmed offers a definition of home: “home can mean where one usually lives, or it can mean where one’s family lives, or it can mean one’s native country” (p. 338). In *Migration and Home*, Mastoureh Fathi Caitríona and Ní Laoire state that homeland is associated with a range of (mostly) positive feelings and experiences of belonging, such as security, familiarity, control, comfort, family and caring relationships, intimacy, grounding in place, and hope (p.3).

Traditionally, home has been defined as the place where our ancestors lived, the place of our origin and home is treated as a fixed place. Amid alienation, isolation and marginalization, migrants see their homeland as an idyllic place of desire where they long to return. The homeland is an imaginary land for successive generations. To them, the hostland is home because they have been born and raised there and have successfully accepted the new culture. The idea of the homeland is created and established through religious and cultural practices.

In *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Avtar Brah, a sociologist, delves into *Homing desire*, a desire to feel at home and reinvent home. She affirms: “Where is home? On the one hand, Home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of locality” (p.188). Avtar Brah affirms that home is not a fixed place and is constantly being created in a different setting. She suggests that although home is associated with the traumas of dislocation, it is also a space of new hope and new beginnings.

Paolo Boccagni, a sociologist reflects on the aspects of *Homing* and argues:

Homing [...] is a range of spatialized social practices through which migrants— as exemplary of people who went through extended detachment from their earlier homes— try to reproduce, reconstruct, and possibly build meaningful home-like settings, feelings and relationships. (p.26)

He proposes that home resides in the constant attempt to make or construct home. As a continuous process, home is reconstructed through memories of the past, practices of the

present and hopes for the future. The migrants' sense of home, which manifests itself in mixed emotions of loss and alienation, is redefined by the reconstruction of cultural identity. They recreate a sense of home and cultural identity through the language, culture, religion and values of the homeland. Homing is a constant process of establishing and renewing feelings of belonging. There is a transition from fixed home to the recreation of home.

Mastoureh Fathi Cairtriona and Ní Laoire note that in counterpoint to traditional conceptions of the homeland as a fixed and bounded place that one leaves or stays in, current argument emphasizes the fluid and dynamic nature of home. Home is understood through a range of concepts such as homing desire, homing and home-making, designating home as a process encapsulating the practices, performances, desires and acts through which home is lived, felt and done (p.4).

Discussion

Manju Kapur's heroine Nina is elegant, educated and financially independent. Nina's status as a single woman often evokes a sense of lack in her. She has been conditioned to believe that marriage accords a social status to women. Thanks to her mother's prayers, Nina receives a marriage proposal from an Indian family whose son has settled in Canada. Ananda is a charming and enviable dentist in Halifax with whom Nina ties the knot in a pompous wedding celebration. Ananda is forced to leave for Canada alone within a few days while Nina awaits her visa. After several months, Nina leaves for Halifax. She arrives at Heathrow for transit with her hair dishevelled and limbs cramped. With mounting excitement and fear, she greets the river Thames with a song. Nina is enchanted and seduced by the dazzling lights of the airport. Amid the English passengers, Nina stands out with an Indian attire. She is a Punjabi and carries a salwar kameez and gold hoop earrings. Her clothing is a marker that she is an immigrant.

Nina begins to experience discomfort, anxiety and uncertainty while absorbing the scenario around her. Though everything appears interesting to her in the new environment, she is perturbed and bewildered with what appears to be the first phase of a culture shock. Manju Kapur explains Nina's state of mind: "For the first time in her life Nina felt out of place. Wrong clothes, shoes, handbag. Maybe in their eyes she was like the woman sweeping" (p.104). Overcoming her fear and agony of travelling to a foreign land, she boards the flight to Toronto.

With escalating anxiety and nausea, Nina lands in the host country and goes through immigration. She is perplexed when the other passengers gaze at her bridal bangles and she

covers them with a shawl. When Nina reaches the counter, the immigration official checks her passport and demands to see her husband. Nina responds nervously that she has married a Canadian citizen who was in Halifax. She is ushered into a small room where an official bombards her with questions about her education, her qualifications and her proof of marriage. The official examines the photographs, the wedding invitation and the marriage certificate. Nina is belittled, humiliated and harassed by the White woman. Though filled with rage and apprehensions of being deported, Nina responds politely to the condemnation. Nina expresses furiously: “This woman is looking for a reason to get rid of me. I am the wrong colour. I come from the wrong place. See me in this airport, of all the passengers the only one not allowed to sail through immigration, made to feel like an illegal alien. See, see, see” (p. 107). Nina asserts that she has become a victim of racial prejudice. She is discriminated and antagonized on the basis of her race and ethnicity. Vijay Agnew’s statement holds true in this context:

Indian women, like other racialized women, experience racism when white Canadians encounter their ‘difference’ from the norm, whether it is skin colour, different clothing, or an inability to speak English. Every day racism ‘expresses itself in glances, gestures, forms of speech, and physical movements. (p.29)

Later, Nina is permitted to leave and she walks down the corridor. She feels embarrassed that her dignity has been at stake in the new country. Forgetting the injustices and her displeasure, she enters into a restaurant and relaxes sipping a tea and a bread roll. She boards the next plane ruminating over her immigrant status in Canada.

Nina alights the plane and awaits her luggage in front of the carousel. She covers her golden bangles with a shawl and holds the luggage cart. Ananda waits for her impatiently worried about her experiences at the immigration office and the customs’ office. When Ananda greets her, Nina records her tribulations to Ananda and argues: “They wouldn’t treat a European or American like that [...] They did it because we are third people” (p.109). Nina feels devalued, stigmatized and excluded on the basis of racial dominance. Nina reaches home and examines the tiny apartment. She rolls the curtains and admires the morning scapes with splendour. She unpacks all her Indian stuffs on the bed. She strokes the intricately woven saris and gazes at the richness of the Indian fabric. After relishing the pizza with pepperoni, anchovies, olives, green peppers and onions, Nina snuggles into bed and sleeps like a child.

After a tiring journey, Nina wakes up from her slumber and prefers to have a good meal. She opens the fridge and stares at the milk, eggs, bread, butter and the pink meat slices. She fancied some Indian food but gets delighted with some grape juice. Nina becomes nostalgic of the Indian restaurants at the Ambassador Hotel and at Dasaprakash where she had enjoyed scrumptious Indian delicacies. She manages to have a sandwich with peanut butter for lunch and cereals for dinner. Nina is a typical vegetarian who abstained from meat, fish or eggs. She broods over the recipes that her mother has written for her, the special pickle that she has prepared for her so lovingly. Distance from one's motherland generates a sense of loss. Amidst this diasporic life which has been intimidated, memories of her home give Nina some comfort and consolation. Memories enable her to escape and sail into an idealized past. Rather than a shift from one dwelling to another, it involves a major transition and estrangement from home. Agnew affirms: "Memories are the glue that holds the past and present together. They give shape and texture to women's subjectivity, to identities that are fragmented by immigration, displacement, and diasporic living" (p.19). The memories ignite their emotions of home as a haven filled with love, comfort, longing and desire. The excitement of beginning a new life in a new environment alleviates the pain of leaving behind her home and homeland.

Late in the evening, Ananda plans to run the errands to purchase some Indian stuffs for Nina. She wears an embroidered salwar kameez and carries a pashmina shawl. To Ananda's astonishment, Nina has fetched only saris and salwars from India. Her Indian attire represents her home and her cultural identity. Brah states: "For some, such as the South Asian groups [...], cultural identification with the Asian subcontinent might be by far the most important element" (p.189). There exists a very strong nexus between migration and home. Home establishes a sense of belonging and a haven of desire. Neena is delected after cooking rice, dal and raita while Ananda makes a grilled fish for himself. When Ananda is invited for dinner by his friends, Nina is gorgeous in her patola sari. She is greeted with warmth and food is served. While the others enjoy braised turkey, Nina adheres to the vegetarian food of rolls, salad, potatoes and beans. She informs the gathering that she is a vegetarian. This is a reflection of the food culture in Hinduism. Food culture is a marker of caste, class, family, kinship and Indian ethnicity. Nina strictly abides by her Indian culinary orthodoxy. Home is associated with a sense of belonging and connection and this is established through the food culture. Habitually, Nina mashed her rice with dal and mango pickle and scooped yoghurt from a carton. Paolo

Boccagni's postulation is pertinent in this reading: "The separation from what used to be home is paralleled by systematic attempts to establish new home arrangements, or to recover meaningful dimensions of the past ones" (p.18).

Nina maintains her traditional dress, spends the whole day wandering in the streets, running errands, reading novels, and eating to her heart's delight. Little by little, Nina begins to feel boredom and isolation. Nina feels homesick and pathetically forlorn and writes to her mother and her friend. Nina feels the loss of her home and her alienation, isolation and marginalization in the new country. She has never been lonely in her home in India. The presence of her mother, the vendors, the gardener, the maid, the landlady, the college, the students, the faculty have all been woven into her day and life. Nina attempts to idealize her home through her memories of her home. Cultural differences make Nina feel alienated and heighten her feelings of desolation, nostalgia, and create a longing for home. Ananda dials two international calls to facilitate Nina speak to her mother. Her mother's voice, clear and loud carries her to Jangpura, Nina's hometown that she longs for and cherishes.

Nina bolsters her morale from the objects and memories of her home in her present diasporic life. As Brah states that "home is also the lived experience of locality" (p.188), Nina has to establish a sense of home in Halifax. Nina also expresses that it was quintessential to adapt to the habits of the west. One fine evening, Ananda and Nina plan to dine at the Indian restaurants in the locale. Ananda says: "From there, we can go to the Taj Mahal on Spring Garden Road. An Indian couple runs it and they serve pretty decent food" (p.137). The restaurant Taj Mahal and Indian food resonate in Nina's ears and she is captivated by the sumptuous Indian food. Rai and Reeves' affirmation is pertinent in this context. They state:

Wherever South Asians have migrated, moreover, they have carried with them the social, religious and cultural practice of the 'homeland'. These may be manifest in the private domains of households or, when there exists a sufficiently large number of South Asians, be represented in more public spaces. It is not surprising, therefore, that South Asian religious and cultural institutions, restaurants, movies, music and fashion shops are a common sight all over the world. In many cosmopolitan cities, entire neighbourhoods have been transformed into 'Little Indias' where one can easily purchase South Asian produce and enter into a recognisable 'Indian' locale. (2009, p.4)

Nina enters into the restaurant and scrutinizes a miniature Taj Mahal that glowed in red lights. The walls were decorated with saris and photographs of the exotic Indian places. The air was filled with the aroma and flavours of Indian cuisine. The savour of the spices – turmeric, cumin, coriander, red chillies, roasted onions and garlic, tomatoes that has travelled from India to Canada buttressed her emotions. She stares at the menu decorated with freizes from Mughal architecture and orders chicken do piyaza, palak paneer, dal raita and naan. Movindri Reddy states that “Throughout the diaspora, food maintains some continuities with the regional cuisine of India [...] It emphasizes the connectedness to India but also recognizes their presence in a place outside India. (pp.154 -155). She enjoys the gourmet meal and also feels the touch of home when she is offered the saunf and mishri (rock sugar) with the bill.

To resist assimilation into the host country, Nina attempts to revive and recreate her linguistic, religious, cultural and social practices of her home. Paolo Boccagni’s argument holds true: “It (home) refers to a set of social practices, values and symbols that [...] can be transferred and reproduced into different settings over time” (p. 5). On another occasion, she gets prepared for a party, a barbecue that Ananda’s best friend was hosting. Though she prefers to wear her extraordinary sari, she puts the brocade away and prefers an elegant silk salwar with gold jewellery and bindi. As Agnew states: “these women ought to retain their traditional dress as a symbol of their cultural identity” (p. 24). As a woman who has been accustomed to traditional dress and vegetarian food, Nina finds it difficult to adapt to the Western world. Though she feels that western clothing can ease her transition and integration, she resists. Nina was quite comfortable with her Indian clothing in summer, yet the harsh winter made her skin dry, flaky and cracked. She ponders that she has to assimilate to the Canadian lifestyle and clothing. She experiments with a jean, coat, tops, shawls and boots and buys them. She visits the library and wanders through the public gardens in her western outfit. Agnew’s statement holds true in this context. He affirms that “perhaps their lack of confidence and insecurity in their new environment makes them content with the small adjustments in their dress that they must make” (p. 24). Code’s observation is very true. He declares:

Women have had to negotiate the precarious balance between the tenacious forces of integration and the desire to maintain a sense of their cultural identity as a strategy of self-preservation in their country of adoption. (p.396)

In consonance with Nina's new western look, Ananda pleads Nina to call him Andy. Nina disapproves the idea of western name in her home. She confesses that it would "carry alienation into the bedroom" (p.153). Ananda is a Hindu name that originates from Sanskrit. Hinduism inspires pride in Nina that asserts her cultural identity. As Bhikhu Parekh et al state that "religion and language are the most tangible markers of cultural identity" (p. 29).

One morning, as Nina twiddles the radio knob, she hears voices in Hindi and her hands tremble. The commentator reports the Kumbh Mela, held in Allahabad every twelve years. It was an extremely auspicious event for the devout Hindus. Thousands of Indians march to the holy Ganges to immerse themselves in the river chanting Vedic hymns, blowing the conch shells and beating the drums. She recollects her visit to the Kumh Mela, the splashing in the freezing water with her parents and sister and the joyful train ride back home. Nina has a feeling of pensive melancholy as she can no longer speak her mother tongue in Canada. Agnew states: "The immigrants' loss of home is aggravated by the loss of a mother tongue that produces a psychological scarring" (p.112).

As Nina is busy shopping with Sue, she comes across a fair abuzz of spectators and becomes gloomy and depressed. The scenario reminds her of the Diwali fair in her hometown with rides on elephants, bangle sellers, paper lanterns, firecrackers, earthen diyas and delicious food. Nina is soaked in nostalgic feelings. The droppings of the horses remind her of the cow dung patties that were dried in the sun in her hometown. Agnew reiterates: "The past is always with us, and it defines our present; it resonates in our voices, hovers over our silences, and explains how we came to be ourselves and to inhabit what we call our homes" (p. 3).

Nina ruminates on her immigrant status and interrogates her identity. Despite her status of 'other', she sets her foot to explore her life in Canada with hope and determination. Nina enrolls in the Department of Library Science in Dalhousie University and also joins as a part-time librarian to make her own money. Nina has crossed the frontiers into a different culture that can intimidate, yet she gets prepared to explore the unknown and develop her intellect with a determination to shape herself. Though her path can be arduous, the quest for a new journey can transform and shape her identity. Nina is deeply rooted in the past, yet she acknowledges the transformation in her which can shape her identity anew. Brah points out that "diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings" (p.190).

Every evening, Ananda prepares some dal and rice and vegetables for Nina while frying onions and tomatoes and meat with butter, cumin and coriander for himself. Though Ananda was an Indian, he has lost the Indian flavours owing to his acculturation to the Canadian lifestyle. Nina cultivates in Ananda the habit of blending and fusing spices of Indian cuisine. As Paolo Boccagni affirms: “International migration is tantamount to an extended detachment from what used to be home. [...] Migrants’ everyday life, therefore is a privileged terrain to make sense of home *by default*. It brings to the fore a range of emotions, practices and living arrangements that mirror the need to recreate home anew” (p. 2), Nina recreates a sense of home through the Indian cuisine that transports her to her homeland. She gets reconnected to her homeland through the recreation of a sense of home and consequently her cultural identity is affirmed.

Anada loves braising a trout with lemon and parsley sauce. Nina has always been true to her upbringing as a traditional Hindu devout and strictly adhered to being a vegetarian in the Canadian land. When she finds the sauce bubbling with trout, she likes it and attempts to taste the fish. She chews the bit reluctantly wondering that she was getting integrated to the new culture while breaking the traditions that have been withheld by her family. The following day, she tastes chicken and likes it. When Ananda relishes the spareribs of beef, Nina is dumbfounded. She reminisces how her mother had worshipped cows. In Indian culture, cows are venerated as goddesses. These memories forbid Nina from consuming beef which emphasize the culture of her roots. As Rai and Reeves affirm: “Nonetheless, sustaining some sense of ‘Indian-ness’ (or ‘South Asian-ness’) – remains a prime concern” (2009, p.89). Following Boccagni’s theory, Homing is established through a constant process of renewing feelings of belonging to her homeland.

Though Nina tries to carve a niche for her in the Canadian University, she is desperately nostalgic and longs to visit her idyllic place of desire. She yearns to visit her dear mother and confesses to Ananda that her heart was almost breaking. She says: “I wish we lived in India [...] Please, can’t we go to India” (pp. 278-279). Ananda plans her trip to India. While travelling, she is elated and her heart throbs that the flight would get her closer to her mom and sister. She also plans to take her mother to the hill station for a holiday. She intends to provide all the comfort to her mother during the trip to India and longed to express the accumulated

emotions. Nina's mom and her sister embrace her while choking with happiness and greet her with tears. She unpacks the chocolates and cheese and other stuffs that she has brought from Halifax and lies on the lap of her mother. She shares her experiences in Canada to her mother while mashing the delicious, melting lauki kofta into the fragrant basmati rice with cold dahi. She wonders that has been the greatest bliss in her life. After a week, she takes some respite in the hills of Mussoorie with her mother. Nina is glad that her mother looked healthier in the arms of the serene nature. She also visits Miranda House where she has been a professor, her friends and faculty. She musters her strength to depart her hometown after her mother's maternal gaze shatters her.

Back in Canada, isolation and nostalgia surround her. Yet, she pursues her studies and finds solace in her job. She is devastated and becomes doleful when she discovers that Ananda has been exploring White bodies during her trip to India. She decides to quit her the institution of marriage and goes in search of her dream. As Agnew states "immigrants are successful in realizing their dream of a better standard of living" (p. 20), the mishaps strike a chord in Nina's life and she becomes decisive of carving a path for herself. With outstanding academic records, she is called for an interview by the University of New Brunswick. Manju Kapur ends with this note: "When you are reinventing yourself, anywhere could be home" (p.330). This highlights the theory that identity is not fixed and Nina is constantly in the process of becoming and reinventing herself. The concept of home is neither fixed but constantly being created. Nina is in the search of a new home.

Conclusion

The identities of migrants are fragmented by dislocation and diasporic living. The memories are the bridging gaps between the past and the present and give shape to women's subjectivity. The memories reverberate in their souls and keep them connected to their homeland. Homing is a constant process of establishing and renewing feelings of belonging to the homeland through memories of the past. The migrants persist in sharing their language, culinary traditions and other cultural practices of their homeland. They continue to travel in pursuit of their quest with innumerable risks in the new environment yet they are determined to tread the path that constantly shapes their identity anew. Though they are intimately attached to their homeland, they reinvent themselves and are constantly in the process of

becoming. They reestablish a sense of home through their cultural practices and values that can be transferred and reproduced in a different setting.

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