

From Immurement to Liberation: Migration, Abjection and Otherness in the Immigrant Through Julia Kristeva's Lens

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Abstract—In literature, migration is a common theme that explores the emotional, social, and cultural impacts of moving from one place to another. It often symbolizes exploring displacement, identity crises, cultural conflicts, and personal transformation. Manju Kapur vividly portrays the psychological struggles associated with migration through the journey of its protagonist, Nina in the novel *The Immigrant*. Through the character of Nina in *The Immigrant*, Kapur portrays a self-discovered woman who undergoes a transformative journey. Nina migrates not only from India to Canada but also from traditional constraints to self-identity, from cultural conformity to personal independence. This research paper analyzes the novel by using the lens of Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical feminism theory. This article will apparently focus on Nina, whose journey reflects an immigration towards a new way of life, one that embraces autonomy, adaptation, and empowerment.

Index Terms—Infertility and Abjection, Migration, Psychological Fragmentation, and Reclaiming the Self.

I. INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur is one of the Indian eminent female writers. Her legacy of writing about women's issues continues to inspire contemporary writers in a fascinating way. She explores women's socio-cultural struggles in a male-dominated society, portraying female protagonists who establish their self-image and prove their true strength. She challenges the traditional notion that a woman's role is limited to household chores and family responsibilities, instead highlighting women as independent individuals striving to fulfill their dreams. Kapur emphasizes that ambition and recognition are not exclusive to men;

women, too, seek their rightful place in contemporary society.

In the past, women were often submissive and dependent on their fathers, husbands and finally her sons. However, times have changed, women now possess self-driven desires and are willing to challenge patriarchy and societal norms to secure their place in society. Kapur, brings the stereotypical work that suppresses women's identities like cooking, nurturing children, and serving their husbands to have the right to dream, pursue their aspirations towards education, and establish their own identities through powerful empowerment. Kapur criticizes the psycho-social conditioning of women, illustrating how migration intensifies patriarchal oppression while also offering possibilities for self-liberation.

The novel delves into the challenges of integration, gender roles, and identity reformation, as Nina struggles to adjust to an unfamiliar society. The novel highlights how migration is not just a physical transition but a psychological struggle, where the characters confront the loss of home, belonging, and self. Through the novel *The Immigrant*, Kapur presents migration as an intricate process that transforms relationships, aspirations, and introspection. The novel presents the idealization of immigration and underscores the emotional and cultural price individuals pay when maneuvering between two worlds. Thus, *The Immigrant* is a haunting impression on the deeper realities of migration, making it a vital contribution to Indian literature.

Psychoanalytical feminism explores how patriarchal structures shape the subconscious, influencing women's identities, desires, and struggles. In Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*, the protagonist, Nina, undergoes psychological turmoil as she migrates from India to Canada, grappling with cultural alienation, marital dissatisfaction, and self-discovery. Nina, conditioned by Indian societal norms, initially internalizes the traditional role of a dutiful wife, believing marriage and migration will provide stability and fulfillment. However, her sexual dissatisfaction with Ananda, her professional struggles, and her emotional isolation reveal the deep-seated repression of her desires and aspirations. Ananda's preoccupation with assimilating into Western masculinity further marginalizes Nina, rendering her invisible in both domestic and public spaces.

Julia Kristeva is a prominent Bulgarian-French philosopher, psychoanalyst, and feminist theorist whose work has significantly influenced contemporary feminist thought, literary theory, and psychoanalysis. As a psychoanalytical feminist, Kristeva explores how language, the unconscious, and cultural structures shape gender identity and power dynamics. Unlike traditional feminists, she delves into the deeper psychological and linguistic mechanisms that reinforce gender hierarchies. Drawing from Freud and Lacan, she argues that identity formation occurs through symbolic and unconscious processes.

Kristeva's feminism is often considered poststructuralist and anti-essentialist, as she rejects fixed gender identities and argues that identity is fluid and constantly evolving. She challenges the idea of a unified "woman" and instead focuses on how subjectivity is constructed through language and unconscious desires. Her work has had a profound impact on feminist theory, particularly in discussions of maternal identity, exclusion, and the role of women in symbolic structures. While some feminists critique her approach for being too abstract and detached from activism, her insights remain crucial for understanding the deeper psychological and cultural forces that shape gender and oppression.

Julia Kristeva's Psychoanalytical Theory:

Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical theory is a fusion of Freudian psychoanalysis, Lacanian structuralism, semiotics, and poststructuralist thought, offering a deep exploration of identity formation, language, and

the unconscious. As a psychoanalyst and philosopher, Kristeva focuses on how subjectivity is constructed through symbolic and unconscious processes, emphasizing the role of language in shaping human experience. Her psychoanalytical theory has had a profound impact on feminism, literary criticism, and philosophy, providing a framework to analyze gender, exile, trauma, and the complexities of human subjectivity. By challenging rigid identity formations, Kristeva's work opens new possibilities for rethinking power, language, and the unconscious.

Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection and Otherness:

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and otherness is a crucial concept in psychoanalytic feminism, introduced in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980). Kristeva's theory is widely used in feminist criticism, migration studies, and literary analysis to examine how societies construct identity, exclusion, and power through unconscious psychological processes. Her work challenges fixed identities and highlights the complex interplay between culture, language, and the unconscious in shaping human experience. Abjection occurs when something disrupts the clear distinction between self and other, creating feelings of disgust, fear, or horror. It explores how individuals define their identity by rejecting what they find disturbing, impure, or threatening to their sense of self. This rejection process, known as abjection, plays a fundamental role in shaping subjectivity and societal boundaries. Examples of the abject include bodily fluids, corpses, and the maternal body, things that blur the boundaries between life and death, self and non-self. This rejection is necessary for the formation of the self, yet it also marginalizes the feminine, reinforcing societal exclusions and gender hierarchies.

According to Kristeva, patriarchal societies associate femininity and motherhood with abjection, positioning women as impure and marginalizing them as the "Other." The concept of otherness in Kristeva's theory builds on Lacan's idea of the symbolic order, where individuals enter society by adopting its language and norms. However, women, immigrants, and other marginalized groups often exist on the periphery of this order, treated as outsiders who do not fully belong. This exclusion reinforces power structures and gender hierarchies, keeping the abject and the "Other" at a distance to maintain social order. Patriarchal societies,

women are frequently positioned as the “Other,” marginalized and excluded through these unconscious mechanisms. Kristeva also engages with the concept of otherness, arguing that patriarchal culture constructs women, immigrants, and marginalized groups as the “Other” to maintain social boundaries. Her work suggests that identity is never fixed but rather fluid and dynamic, shaped by unconscious desires and cultural forces.

In *The Immigrant* Nina, the protagonist of the novel, a 30-year-old English lecturer from India, marries Ananda, a Canadian-Indian dentist, and migrates to Canada, dreaming for a better life. However, her migration experience is remarked by alienation, loneliness, and an increasing cultural and emotional detachment. Nina embodies both ‘abjection’ and ‘otherness’ as she migrates from India to Canada. She experiences a profound identity crisis, feeling alienated in her new environment, both culturally and emotionally. Nina, as a migrant Indian woman in Canada, experiences double abjection both as a woman subjected to patriarchal expectations and as an immigrant struggling with cultural displacement. Her journey reflects Kristeva’s ideas of bodily abjection, social alienation, and the fragmentation of identity as she grapples with infertility, an unfulfilling marriage, and a search for selfhood.

Kristeva links abjection to bodily experiences, such as menstruation and sexuality, which society often repressed, Nina’s struggles with infertility and sexual dissatisfaction in her marriage reflect her alienation from both her own body and societal expectations of womanhood. Her inability to conceive makes her feel inadequate, reinforcing her abjected status as a woman who fails to fulfill traditional reproductive roles.

The Female Body and Abjection:

Kristeva associates abjection with bodily functions and reproduction, especially regarding women’s bodies, which are seen as polluting or uncontrollable in patriarchal discourse. Nina’s infertility becomes a central cause of her abjection, making her feel inadequate as a wife and woman: “She was failing at the most basic function of a wife bearing a child” [1]. Her infertility reinforces her abject identity in a patriarchal society where motherhood is expected. Her body becomes a site of rejection, both by her husband Ananda, who remains emotionally and sexually distant,

and by societal expectations that define a woman’s worth through motherhood. Kristeva argues that women’s bodies are othered by patriarchal systems, and Nina’s fertility intensifies her exclusion.

Kristeva argues that bodily functions, particularly related to women, are seen as “abject” because they threaten societal purity. Nina’s sexual dissatisfaction with Ananda further alienates her from her own body. She becomes disgusted with herself, mirroring Kristeva’s notion that abjection is the experience of confronting something rejected yet intimately tied to the self. Her body becomes an unwanted space, a source of shame and rejection. Kristeva states: “The abject has only one quality of the object that of being opposed to ‘I.’” [2]. This reflects Nina’s dissociation from her own desires and identity.

Migration and the “Other”:

Kristeva describes the “Other” as “someone who exists outside the dominant culture, never fully belonging” [3]. Nina, as an immigrant, experiences “double marginalization” as a woman within a patriarchal marriage and as a foreigner in Canada. She finds herself “linguistically, culturally, socially and emotionally displaced,” unable to assimilate fully. Ananda, her husband, actively erases his Indian identity to integrate into Western society, while Nina struggles to find belongingness, making her an “Other” in both India and Canada. Kristeva’s concept of the “Other” applies to individuals who are pushed to the margins of society, unable to fully integrate into dominant cultural norms.

Nina, as an immigrant in Canada, faces this “othering” in multiple ways: as a cultural isolation she struggles to adapt to Western ways of life, feeling out of place both at home and in public spaces. Unlike Nina, Ananda’s assimilation actively rejects his Indian identity, undergoing dental surgery to remove signs of his ethnicity. His willingness to erase his past and further alienates Nina, making her feel like an outsider in her marriage. “It was as though she was expected to be grateful to be transported to this land of plenty” [1]. This reflects Kristeva’s view that the “Other” is often expected to conform to dominant structures while being subtly excluded from them.

Ananda’s sexual indifference is “domestic othering” whereas his secret affair with a white woman

reinforces Nina's erasure within her own marriage. Nina's displacement is not just physical but psychological, as she cannot find belonging in either India or Canada. "She had never felt so alone, not even in India. The loneliness of being with a person who did not communicate was more painful than being alone"[1]. Kristeva explains that the immigrant experiences estrangement from both the host and native cultures, creating a permanent sense of exile[3]. Nina, too, exists in this liminal space, not fully belonging to either India or Canada. "As soon as I become I, I am 'other,' a stranger to myself" [3]. This reflects Nina's fragmented identity, torn between her past and her uncertain present.

Psychological Fragmentation

Kristeva argues that abjection leads to emotional fragmentation, a loss of identity where the individual is neither fully included nor completely excluded. Nina's emotional detachment from Ananda, her isolation in a foreign land, and her eventual affair signify a rebellion against the patriarchal and immigrant identity imposed on her. She resists abjection by seeking agency in her desires and career. Kristeva describes "abjection as a process where the self-rejects what it cannot accept"[2].

Nina's internal conflict between tradition and personal freedom creates a fractured sense of self as her mother's expectations enforce a traditional role of a submissive wife. Ananda's detachment forces her into isolation and her affair with Anton a Western scholar, can be seen as an attempt to "break free from abjection," though it becomes an act of rebellion but does not lead to true fulfillment nor resolve her emotional void. "She was still an immigrant, still alone, still struggling to find a place for herself" [1]. Kristeva states that "the object subject is caught between rejection and longing" [2]. Nina wants belonging and freedom simultaneously, but the boundaries between desire and rejection blur, making her experience of abjection inescapable.

Kristeva argues that "abjection leads to a crisis of identity," where the individual feels neither fully included nor fully excluded. Nina's experience of "loneliness, sexual dissatisfaction, and professional struggles causes her fragmentation" she feels trapped between her past self and her new, uncertain identity.

Instead, it highlights her internal conflict between desire and guilt, mirroring Kristeva's view that abjection is a "constant push-and-pull between rejection and longing". This demonstrates Kristeva's notion that abjection is inescapable, Nina is caught between two cultures, neither of which fully accepts her.

Reclaiming the Self

By the end of the novel, Nina begins to assert her independence, breaking free from the abjected identity imposed upon her. Her decision to leave Ananda can be seen as Kristeva's act of rejecting the boundaries society sets for women, moving towards a new, albeit uncertain, selfhood. Kristeva suggests that confronting abjection can lead to self-liberation. Finally, she rejects the roles imposed on her; she chooses to leave Ananda and embrace an uncertain but self-defined future. Her departure signifies a break from abjection, though it does not guarantee absolute freedom. "It was time to shape herself in a way that was different, freer"[1]. This aligns with Kristeva's idea that abjection can be resisted through self-assertion and rejection of imposed identities. Nina's journey is not one of complete empowerment but of a tentative step toward autonomy.

Kristeva argues that confronting "abjection leads to self-liberation," even if it is incomplete[2]. By the end of *The Immigrant*, Nina spurns her assigned roles, choosing independence over conformity. "Kristeva suggests that abjection can be transformed into agency through rebellion" [4]. Nina's decision to leave Ananda represents her defiance of patriarchal and immigrant abjection, though she remains uncertain about her future. "To oppose abjection, we must transform it into a space for new meaning" [4]. Nina's departure marks a partial victory against abjection, signifying her refusal to be defined by patriarchy or cultural displacement.

II. CONCLUSION

Using Kristeva's theory, *The Immigrant* can be read as a novel that explores and illustrates Nina's journey as the abjection of the female body, the alienation of the immigrant, the psychological trauma of migration and patriarchal oppression and the struggle for self-identity, making her both a victim and rebel against

societal norms. Through Nina's experience of abjection and otherness Nina's journey reflects and marginalizes her body as infertile her unsuccessful marriage to Ananda who is indifferent and her immigrant status as self-alienation in Canada known to her as the "other" land.

Nina rejects her imposed roles and moves toward self-reclamation, making her journey of Kristeva's struggle against abjection. Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, introduces the concept of abjection, which refers to the rejection of anything disturbing the social order, particularly regarding the female body, desire, and identity formation. Kristeva also examines the "Other", focusing on how women and immigrants are excluded from dominant power structures. Nina, the protagonist of Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*, embodies both abjection and otherness as she migrates from India to Canada, experiencing cultural displacement, marital dissatisfaction, and an identity crisis. Through Nina's character Kapur's novel aligns with Kristeva's ideas of abjection and others, showing how migration and patriarchy impose infertility and abjection, Migration and others, psychological alienation and fragmentation and reclaiming the self.

Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* aligns with Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and the "Other", showing how women and immigrants experience psychological fragmentation and exclusion. Yet, by choosing independence, Nina resists complete abjection, making her journey of Kristeva's struggle for selfhood. Thus, *The Immigrant* illustrates Kristeva's idea that women and immigrants live on the margins of society, constantly negotiating between rejection and identity formation.

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