

Understated prose brings out the angst of the immigrant

Book: 'The Immigrant'; Author: Manju Kapur; Publisher: Random House India; Price: Rs.395

The story is set in the mid-1970s. It is about Nina, a lecturer in Delhi University's Miranda College (like the author), who lives with her mother in strained circumstances, slowly growing older and watching the faint wrinkles appear on her face while her body clock ticks louder.

The death of her diplomat father has left Nina and her mother struggling to make ends meet in a small flat in Delhi's Jangpura neighbourhood. A visit to a bureaucrat-cum-astrologer sets her life into a different path through an 'arranged introduction' with an NRI dentist, who arrives from Halifax, Canada, for the viewing ceremony and the decision to get married.

The book runs through the last days of the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi. It describes the general feeling of malaise and frustration, the sense that nothing is right with the country, when the brightest are looking at ways to escape abroad.

Nina's visa would take three months and her newly wed husband Ananda has to leave without her. Ananda's brother-in-law, Ramesh, a bureaucrat on the fast track, is keen to use his contacts to hurry up the visa but Ananda is positive this would backfire, while his sister Alka implies that they didn't know the extent of Ramesh's contacts.

Nina goes back to her college and experiences the respect that comes with marriage. It is a tiny shift of focus, Kapur writes, and there it is - Nina Sharma is an accepted member of society, married and respected for she is bound for the Western big time.

Meanwhile election fever is in the air in Delhi; the Janata Party has been formed, but the forces of dictatorship seemed so firmly entrenched that Nina votes for the Janata party in despair rather than hope.

Manju Kapur's descriptive powers bring the story alive; there are vignettes that sound familiar. In London Nina sees a 'sweeping woman, long handled mop, salwar kameezed with gold hoop earrings. Fellow country woman, we are sisters, you and I. The woman looks up, but so blankly, it is obvious that the sari clad lady in front of her strikes no chord, her kindly gaze, her twitching, ready to smile lips mean nothing.'

The episode with the grim immigration officer rings so true and describes the middle class Indian's reaction to being questioned by a grim-faced woman immigration officer. Nina is asked when Ananda first came to Canada, about his relatives in Canada, in India, what he did, the name of his partner in the dental practice, her details, her professional qualifications.

'Nina has no idea why this is happening to her - she has a valid visa. She is decent, respectable, god-fearing and worthy. She feels edgy; she is alone with a woman who makes no eye contact, for whom she is less than human. Though she was addressed as ma'am no respect is conveyed. Nina has been used to respect. It came with her class, her education, her accent, her clothes.'

Manju Kapur's meticulous details describe the alienation and isolation of living in and adjusting to a new milieu, coping with a husband's sexual dysfunction while hoping to get pregnant.

Vegetarian Ananda is easily converted to meat-eating Andy, but Nina believes using the word Andy in her home is to carry alienation into the bedroom. Nina's own slow process of assimilation means changing from an easily recognisable Indian woman in an oversized overcoat to a student of library science at the local college.

It is a process that eventually allows her some space and a sense of freedom. But an unsatisfactory relationship, coupled with their insecurities and complexes, leads both of them to stray into extramarital affairs resulting in the slow disintegration of the marriage.

'The Immigrant' is set in the era when the great migration to North America had just started after the US and Canada changed their immigration policies for Asians. But the feelings of isolation and dislocation that Manju Kapur describes in her simple prose would strike a chord with present-day Indian immigrants trying to adjust to life in the west.

(Shubha Singh can be reached at shubhasingh101@gmail.com)

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