The Immigrant
by Manju Kapur

Reviewed by Madeline Coopsammy

Manju Kapur won the Commonwealth Prize for First Novels (Eurasia section) for her novel Difficult Daughters. Two other novels, A Married Woman and Home, were well received, but did not have the sustained brilliance of her first.

Manju Kapur teaches English literature at Miranda House, a Women’s College of Delhi University. The College is the backdrop for some of the chapters and the novel is dedicated to the prestigious College, which is famous both in India and elsewhere.

That the protagonist Nina is a lecturer at Miranda House is a major factor in her snagging of Ananda, a dentist residing in Halifax who has returned to India for a bride. Nina is already thirty and dowryless, but neither Ananda nor his sister, the marriage arranger, makes this an issue.

The subject of arranged marriages has been a theme of a number of Indian novels, particularly when the young couple settles in the west. There the adjustment to married life is exacerbated by the challenges of immigration and acculturation. Though such factors as education and class are considered when marriages are being arranged, and, as in the case of Nina and Ananda, the couple meets on a number of occasions before agreeing to marry, this is not enough to know each other’s character and to judge compatibility.

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 mores of the west. In order to adjust to the west, Nina sheds her sarees and becomes non-vegetarian. As a middle-class Indian who grew up in Brussels until the death of her diplomat father, Nina wants to maintain her status when she tries western attire. However, her first purchases leave her feeling decidedly frumpy and she knows she has made unfashionable choices.

Plot, dialogue and settings keep the reader engaged. The characters are believable. Ananda was so real that I found myself condemning his eastern male chauvinism and aligning myself with Nina. We can empathize with Nina’s mother and her natural desire to see her daughter settled. There is Canadian Sue, a mother of young children, who tries to help Nina adjust, but the only group she can introduce Nina to is La Leche League, which is rather ironic, for Nina is childless. Two other Canadian women in the novel are less admirable. Ananda’s uncle’s Canadian wife Nancy is shallow and selfish. Mandy, an office temp worker, is too lazy to find a more secure career. Both these women want the social status that dentists bring but make no effort to understand or appreciate Indian culture.

Kapur writes of issues facing today’s Indian woman, both in India and in the west, issues of marriage, home and family, and succeeds in this very readable novel.

Madeline Coopsammy attended Miranda House as an Indian Government scholarship student from the Caribbean many years ago.

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