

## Manju Kapur's *Home*: A Voice of Protest

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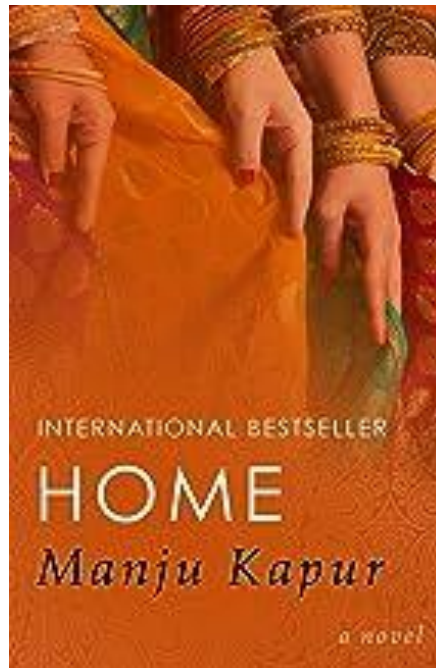
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This research paper attempts to investigate the aspect of protest expressed by Manju Kapur's female protagonists in the novel *Home*. Almost every Indian English Woman Novelist has addressed "protest issues" in their works. The goal here is to discover what feminist attitude Manju Kapur employs in her story to highlight the suffering of women. This article investigates the spirit of resistance against patriarchal hegemony that the subjugated women characters engage in in their own unique ways. *Home* (2006) is the novel under consideration.

The protagonists of contemporary Indian English women novelists are educated, career-oriented, smart women who are psychologically repressed by hegemonic forces. As modern literary theory focuses on 'self-presentation,' female novelists investigate the inner problems of their female protagonists while also situating them in cultural, political, and

social frameworks. The frequent concerns of protest highlighted by women novelists revolve around the woman's identity, her struggle against oppressive patriarchal systems.

The major works of almost all Indian women novelists depict these 'questions of protest' in one way or another along the following parameters: They symbolise the battle that calls into question the patriarchal prescriptions of a virtuous woman.

They reject the given responsibilities within the family and society, as well as the established paths. Kapur sets out to convey the suffering of women in her own unique style.

### ***Home***

While everything else in the world has changed dramatically, women's status and authority in regard to males has stayed relatively constant. The novel is informed by the parts and pieces that are instantly recognisable with all of the happenings in the mixed families - marriages, celebrations, scandals, where Kapur unwaveringly throws the spotlight on the women. A large number of women appear in the novel, including Rupa and Sona, two childless sisters, their daughters-in-law, and the novel's central character, Nisha, Sona's daughter born after 10 years to her, around whom the second part of the story revolves.

The main female characters in the novel, Sona and 'Nisha,' who are mother and daughter, transport the reader to the four walls of the "Home" the "family," which is not a sweet home. All of the women in this Home are unhappy, stressed-out women. Sona of the second generation is stressed because the world around her is changing very fast, while Nisha is stressed because it is not changing enough rapidly, and she feels trapped. Banwari Lal, the family patriarch, believes in the old traditions and believes that men work outside the home and women work within. According to him, men carry on the family line, while women facilitate their purpose.

Apart from Sona and Nisha, who are born into the agony of being a woman, there is 'Sunita,' the daughter of Banwari Lal. The people of home are least concerned about her well-being in her new house because she was married off in a hurry, without much concern about the suitability of a proper match, as if to relieve the burden of the daughter from their shoulders. Her problems are seen as "bad karma" (Home, 17)

Her bad karma' manifests itself in the form of a cruel husband. She is married to a man, an alcoholic who is always on the lookout for his wife's affluent family and coaxes her through various covert tactics to extract money from her father. The exchange of presents continues as long as her father is alive; after him, the poor sister is abandoned to the whims of brothers and their wives. The miserable creature has a son. She is tortured, harassed, and exploited in every way possible until one day she is murdered by her husband for not borrowing money from her brother. Her death was deemed an accident in the kitchen, as are

many dowry deaths in the country. Vicky, her psychologically disturbed child who bears the horrors that his mother silently endured, is eventually returned to the family, and handed to Sona to raise as she is barren. Sona's inner self laments anytime her barrenness is mentioned by her mother-in-law, the home's female patriarch.

All these concerns are primarily shared by bourgeois, middle-class households, where childlessness is regarded as a curse for a woman. In patriarchal Indian society, a woman is only complete if she bears a male heir to carry on the family lineage; else, she does not deserve to live. Even if she succeeds, she is subjected to tortures and humiliations, is treated with contempt, and does not achieve the status she desires in the family. Childlessness is a key source of insecurity, vulnerability, and worthlessness in such women. They frequently become difficult to deal with because they are fighting against not only their bodies, but also the culture that degrades them. Torturing oneself is one of these protests:

"Where could she turn except to God? Every Tuesday she fasted. Previously she would eat fruit and drink milk once during the day, now she converted to nirjal fast. No water from sun-up to sundown. She slept on the floor, abstained from sex, woke up early in the morning, bathed before the sunrise.... in the evening went to the local temple, buying fruit on the way to distribute to as many as Brahmins as possible." (Home, 15)

And further; "She was humble, ready to please. Sona was gold, like her name. But what use was all this if the Banwari Lal blood did not pass on in its expected quality. (Home, P.15) Here Sona pressed her hands to her breasts: they felt good, large full, but the weight only increased her wretchedness. How could she accept they would never be used for more than one purpose? She tried to be calm herself by praying" (Home, 19).

And when Vicky, the son of Sunita is given to her, she cries inwardly in anguish- "but was this dark, ungainly, silent, sullen child any substitute for the baby that was to suckle from her breasts, and use her ample flesh to its satisfaction? Her blood burned, and though her blood was used to burning, it now raged so fiercely that nothing but her own blood could staunch its flames". (Home, 27)

Sona's protests are her contemplations, her broodings- "Then as she had so often, she lay awake at night, going over her mother-in-law's words, gnawing at them, leaching out of them the last shred of bitterness" (Home, 19). For the first ten years of her marriage, she is barren, which causes bitterness, pity, and some glee among the other women in the house, because it is believed that a woman's primary role is to serve as the vessel that will bear the next generation. Sona is forced to concede the futility of her existence.

The story depicts the lives of middle-class families in such a realistic way that women are made to feel trivial when they succumb to patriarchal traps. Keeping fasts and visiting "babas," the holy sages who will bestow blessings on her in order for her to conceive, has put a strain on Sona's mind. 'Home' restores Sona's authority as a woman only after she achieves motherhood through Nisha and then through a son, Raju.

Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan in one of her essays contends:

It is the major, if not the primary site of women's oppression. For it is within the family that girl children experience their first feelings of rejection or discrimination on account of their sex, where they may be required to perform hard domestic labour, denied the freedom to come and go, married off, frequently without their consent and on payment of dowry, and then subjected to vicissitudes of married life, which would include harassment by in laws, marital discord, unwanted pregnancies, domestic drudgery and the continuing cycle of the burden of girl children of their own. <sup>1</sup>

Besides effectively depicting her women's inner and outer worlds, Kapur introduces interactions that defy the social mainstream. Nisha is raised in the 'Home' with all types of conservative women preaching to her. Her entire existence is a series of protests -

She is not allowed to go outside as per the social conventions that women remain at home -As when all boys of the house run out to play in the park, Nisha wails saying that she too wants to go, her mother shortly replies that she can't:

Why? Why can't I? It is better for girls to remain inside. "Why?" "You will get black and dirty.

the moon, the champa flower, the lotus.

dirty and black playing in the sun?"

When I was young people used to say I was like

How can you be like me if you get

who will want to marry (P.53)

This yet again is another step to make sure that she grows into a family princess, princess of the romance fiction always in beautiful, laced frocks and little heeled sandals with bows on them, reconciled to play board games with her grandmother. "Unfortunately her outfits did not match her inclinations." (Home, 53)

All these factors play an important role in building up Nisha's personality.

As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan indicated above, home are the major sites of oppression, and Nisha's home is a site of oppression where she was abused sexually as a youngster by her cousin, Vicky. He is shown repeating the process every time he finds the girl alone, until the girl begins to suffer psychologically, and the family members notice something peculiar about the girl's behaviour. The girl stops eating, becomes pale and is reluctant to reveal the facts publicly. The grandmother suspects that something is wrong with Nisha because she refuses to lie down or close her eyes.

The trauma of sexual assault at such a young age has such a negative impact on the girl that she has trouble sleeping. Even if she falls asleep from exhaustion:

"She awoke crying, 'Why did you let me sleep? I had bad dreams'. But she couldn't say what they were. In the nights to follow the child's screaming became worse." (Home, 65)

Things return to normal when the daughter is sent to her Masi's home, who intuitively recognises what has occurred to her. These are the societal truths that middle-class Indians generally keep hidden. The act of violence highlights two things: one, how the family tries to repress it, and two, how they never come together to comfort the daughter. Instead of discussing alternatives, the terrified Nisha is sent to live with her aunt a few houses away from her home, a punishment for no fault of her own. Situations like this are commonplace under the veils of the joint family system's so-called respectability.

Many female novelists have addressed the problem of sexual assault in order to expose the trauma that women suffer behind the secure walls of their families. The manner in which Kapur raises the issues and then winds in a hushed manner again makes it unclear who is abused, Vicky or Nisha, given that the writer operates on a parallel track of sympathy for both of these characters.

Vicky's sexual abuse of Nisha is attributed to a lack of love and dejection from his maternal relatives, as well as a lack of concern for him following his mother's death. He becomes an eyesore for Sona, Vicky's foster mother, who never thinks of him as a growing boy and treats him as a family attendant to take care of her children. As an outcome, the author brings out his bad conduct.

The home, which is regarded as a safe haven, has become a site for psychological and sexual assaults on young girls and boys. This issue can also be interpreted as a form of portrayal of child abuse in general, with the writer attempting to examine the boy's psychology in order to determine what causes these instances in the family as a result of the selfish limitations of middle-class customs.

Nisha's next protest takes the form of her defiance against marriage customs. She has an innate yearning to be alone. All of this is the result of her uncle's honest efforts to give her with an excellent education and a pleasant family environment for the past eleven years. As a result, the girl becomes the Home's first woman to attend college. A sense begins to drive her that she is different from the other women in the family. She wishes to defy all conventions. She dreams outside of the tight norms of matrimony and family maternity. She resists and dares to marry a boy from a lower caste in a patriarchal family culture where women are meant to remain on the margins of home and the family believes in arranged marriages. She displays resentment against the types of marriages that occur in the family. Raju, her younger brother, marries in the most conventional way possible: "a collection of old fashioned people where Raju is allowed a glimpse of the girl, though his opinion was the least important as every elder of the family believed: "What did the boy know of life, that he should be allowed a decision?" (Home, 249)

Nisha, walks 'off the beaten track' and thinks beyond the frames of an arranged marriage in her family. She asks her Rupa masi:

"What do you think of love marriages? and Rupa replies in a matter-of-fact way, without missing a word- "They are very bad. Require too much adjustment." (Home, 196)

Perhaps she wants to emphasise the dangers of basing a marriage on a single, fleeting passion. There is an immense struggle within Nisha's beliefs as her sense of self-worth finally leads her to oppose her conservative family. She is alone and has no one to rely on. She defies her family's traditional beliefs by marrying Suresh, a low caste boy whose father owns an auto repair shop. Her opposition to family traditions around her marriage grows stronger, and her resolve to pursue a 'love marriage' grows stronger as the boy dares to visit Nisha's father at his shop. She's not allowed to go to college. Her movements were watched. But her decision remains unchanged.

Nisha cries out in anguish when she learns that the boy belongs to a lower caste:

"Who cares about caste these days? What you really want is to sell me in the market". She sobbed with indignant emotion. "Sell me and be done with it. What are you waiting for?" (Home, 200) and further -she became the injured party - "Either I marry him or nobody."

"... She noticed nothing and said nothing. She did not care what happened to her. She ate less, she spoke less. What was there to say?" (Home, 201)

This is a commentary on the paradoxes and tensions that exist between the norms of traditional Indian families and new sets of values based on a more equal and modern India. Only because of her annoyances is a meeting between Raju, her uncle Premnath, and her lover arranged. However, it turns out to be a preplanned event in which the youngster is previously approached, and his family is threatened with dire consequences. However, after being disillusioned in her love and learning of her family's efforts to scare her beloved and his family, she concludes:

'They can't force me to marry someone I don't want to.' (Home, 207)

Though the affair is over, Nisha's resolve to pursue a love marriage demonstrates her strength. Her defiance of social standards and the arranged marriage tradition casts her in the role of a new woman confronting the old order. It is strange that her aspirations do not come true, but her courage to rebel against preconceived beliefs represents the developing new woman of the twenty-first century who asserts her right to pursue her dreams and individuality.

Nisha's protest against the marriages in her family and her determination to marry for love are ruthlessly dissolved indicating the triumph of the hegemonic- heteronormative social order on which popular literature is based. Rather than the radical feminist rejection of patriarchal mores, this narrative depicts the female protagonist's eventual reintegration into the current social framework, but with increased awareness gained via a period of rebellion and self-scrutiny. As a result, the institution of marriage provides little place for a woman to express her wishes. Nisha takes the initiative for a love marriage after the example of her parents, Yashpal and Sona, who married thirty years ago by choice. Their opposition to their daughter's desire to marry for love seems incomprehensible. It can only be explained that Yashpal marries because he is a male and Nisha does not because she is a woman, causing her protests to fall prey to the concept of heterotopia.

And the result is that Nisha suffers in uncountable ways. Lonely from all women in the family she has to grapple with loneliness. The impositions of 'home' fall so heavily upon her psyche that her skin develops eczema of the kind that the doctor terms it as the one caused by stress and strain. Her marital prospects are jeopardised due to her skin condition. She endures all of the humiliating jeering from others since, for a woman in Indian society, her identity is fixed with her marriage. Not only that, but she is mentally burdened as 'amangli', i.e. a girl born under the wrong astrological stars, which are meant to be obstacles to marriage. The girl is completely broken; she breaks out in despair to her masi:

"If it is only marriage that will get me out, and then marry me off to anybody, I don't care.'

Which prince are they waiting for? Or I have to remain here forever?" (Home, 281)

It is at this stage that she displays courage in struggling with the meanness of her life. Despite everything going against her, she again tries to break the tradition of Home that only men could carry the legacy of business. She talks to her father.

"If only you could take me with you, Papaji... I have seen girls working in shops. Why should it be only Ajay, Vijay and Raju? There must be something I too can do."  
(Home, 268)

And then there's no stopping her. She takes the risk of starting her own fashion-mail order business from the family basement. This provides her with a feeling of self, stability, and psychological relief. She transforms from the unworthy woman her home has made her into a woman of substance.

"She names it 'Nisha Creations'... She works hard, she lives with the panic, excitement and challenges with what the businessmen do".  
(Home, 292)

She now had no time to dwell on her defeated thinking. Her mail order fashion clothing business puts her in the spotlight, and everyone in her family admires her entrepreneurial abilities. She gains a new perspective on life; she emerges from her personal crises and is now willing to accept life as it comes to her. Her commercial success coincides with her good fortune, according to the author, in marrying a childless widower. Her spouse says to her after the marriage, as she approaches a covered Verandah:

"Now you are home", said Arvind as they climbed the stairs, he carrying her suitcase, she followed him in gold high heels. "Home." (Home, 302)

These remarks are ironic in the sense that Nisha raises all of her objections against her home, which restricts her in every way to her selfdom, and returns -to this identical 'home,' with just the difference of walls and members within it. This is what Kapur wants to portray that there is no escape from 'Home'. However, it cannot be as bad as it has been for Nisha, Sunita, and Sonu. Nisha's protests have amply demonstrated this.

The marriage tests her entrepreneurial spirit and resets Nisha's life clock to the same time. It becomes more difficult for her to conduct her business at his father's shop and investigate matters with the same zeal as before her marriage. She conceives again, and when she learns she is pregnant twins, her husband gets protective of her. Slowly, 'Nisha Creations' gives way to 'Puja Creations,' and the business of readymade clothing passes from her hands to Raju's wife, and she ends up in the same predicament as every other woman in the home.



An examination of Nisha's predictions in *Home* regarding her protests leads us to assume that Manju Kapur places Nisha in the category of developing Indian women for whom protesting against traditional standards becomes an immediate necessity for survival and existence. Her support for love marriage, and later, her entry into the domain of entrepreneurship, which had previously been unattainable by any woman in the family, is proof that women are rising every day, and their questions and revolts have undoubtedly shaken the hegemonic norms under the patriarchal structure.

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<sup>1</sup> Sunder Rajan, Rajeshwari. 'The Heroine's Progress: Feminism and the Family in the Fiction of Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan and Manjula Padmanabham' in "Desert In Bloom", ed. Meenakshi Bharat (New Delhi: PenCraft International, 2004) pp.80.

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