

**The Image of New Woman in Manju Kapur's
*A Married Woman and Home***

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Manju Kapur

Courtesy: http://www.veethi.com/india-people/manju_kapur-profile-7757-25.htm

Abstract

Manju Kapur, an internationally acclaimed Indian woman novelist, has penned down five novels. Manju Kapur's novels reveal the life of women, their struggle for basic rights, quest for identity and survival. With education they become aware of their self-reliance which is proved in concern with new women. It is thus her endeavour to connect with the readers belonging to different regions that makes her resort to include certain vernacular words in her novels. Manju Kapur through the treatment of the language and delineation of the characters presents a real picture of the society and this is what impresses the readers. She talks about reality, the roots of Indian psyche, family-centred life, generation gap and all real life situations faced by common man. Hence it is observed that she revives the traditional linear narrative fashion and adheres to social realism rather than magic realism. Manju Kapur's novels make the readers observe that

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through the story of her female protagonists, she projects the view that when an Indian woman, in spite of her education, status and intelligence, tries to marry according to her own choice, is likely to spoil her prospects in both the worlds – the one that she revolts against and the other she embraces. The new women in Manju Kapur’s novels do not want to be rubber dolls; instead they nurture the desire of being independent. They want to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond the familial circle. They are not silent rebels but are bold, outspoken, determined and action oriented. All the protagonists know that they cannot depend on others to sort out the domestic situation and so proceed to tackle it on their own. In spite of getting education and freedom, the women protagonists of Manju Kapur’s novels do not blossom into new women in the real sense. Though they dare to cross one patriarchal threshold, they are caught into another, where their free spirits are curbed and all they do is ‘adjust, compromise and adapt’.

Key words: Manju Kapur, image of new woman, *A Married Woman*, *Home*

Introduction

Literature is a term used to describe written and sometimes spoken material. It was derived from the Latin word “Litteratura” which means “writing formed with letters”. It refers to works of the creative imagination, including poetry, drama, fiction, nonfiction, journalism, etc. It represents the culture and tradition of a language or the people. It is more than just a historical or cultural artifact but can serve as an introduction to a new world of experience.

In India, there are different languages and literatures. India is a country where the cultural root is the same though there are marked difference in regional literatures owing to the genius of respective languages in which they are written. There are certain movements that have deeply affected each of the regional Indian literatures. The fact that Indian literatures are a product of a multilingual, multicultural and socio-historical mélange cannot be overlooked. Today Indian literature reached at the apex of creation with the contribution of regional and national writers.

Indian Woman Writing

Indian women writing in English is being recognized as major contemporary current in English literature. Indian women novelists have given a new dimension to Indian writing in

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English. It is still believed that women are the upholders of the rich Indian tradition of fables, storytelling and more. In the mid-nineteenth century, more women started to write in the English language. Women novelists have incorporated the recurring female experiences in their writings and it affected the cultural and language patterns of Indian literature. They have brought a stylized pattern in the whole context of Indian writing. Nowadays, people enjoy reading the anglicized novels presented by the new age women writers. The image of new woman and her struggles for an identity of her own also emerges as one of the prominent themes in the Indian English novel. Such a struggle needs support structures outside the family to enable women to survive.

Manju Kapur, An Emerging Indian Writing in English Writer

Manju Kapur is a very important important novelist of the present century. She was born in Amritsar on August 6, 1948. She has lived through turbulent times in India. She graduated from the Miranda House University College for Women. She went on to take an M.A. at Dalhousie University in Halifax in Nova Scotia and an M.Phil from Delhi University. She teaches English literature at Miranda House, Delhi University though at present she has retired from there.

Manju Kapur is the most talked about and appreciated contemporary Indian English woman novelist. Like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Gita Hariharan, Anita Nair, Shobha De, She has basically written about women, their marriage, and life after marriage, their quest for identity, their trauma and dilemma if failing to achieve the aspired result in their life. Manju Kapur is one of the significant new voices of India in the field of literature. She deals with social issues and she depicts these issues through the characters of her novel. Her novels are constructed around a woman's quest for self-fulfillment, autonomy, self-realization, autonomous personality and self-actualization. Manju Kapur depicts the inner psyche of women's mind.

Manju Kapur is an emerging writer in Indo-Anglian fiction. Her writings have a considerable impact upon the society. First she wrote poetry and then drama. She found her forte in novel writing and now is a full time novelist. Manju kapur has written five novels such as *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2009) and

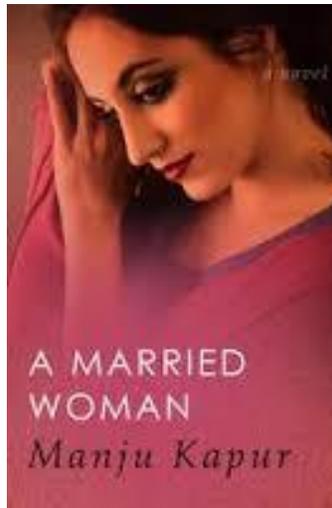
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Custody (2011). Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* received a great international acclaim. This novel was awarded the commonwealth writers prize for the best first book. It was a number one best seller in India. *Home* was shortlisted for Hutch Crossword Book award. Her books have been translated into many languages both in India and outside.

Emergence of New Woman in *A Married Woman*



Today women have been given bigger roles to play in the society. They are entrusted with more responsibility than their male counterparts. The positive step a woman takes will lead to a direction that will see the dawn of real freedom. As Rabindranath Tagore has said, “Woman is a builder and moulder of nations’ destiny. Though delicate and soft as lily, she has a heart far strong and bolder than that of a man. She is the supreme inspiration of any man’s onward march” (qtd. in Yadav 227-228).

Woman’s individual self has very little recognition and self effacement and self denial has been a woman’s normal way of life for ages. Women, no doubt, have acquired constitutional rights of equality with men, but the change in social attitudes towards women is yet to be achieved. In such a scenario her journey from ‘margin’ to the ‘centre’ becomes even more challenged. With the evolution of society, change is palpable. At present one can see women holding responsible positions in public and private offices. Throughout the World, literature has recorded this transition in woman’s stature. In India writers like Shobha De, and Namita Gokhale have depicted women in bolder avatars.

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According to Indian tradition, a woman must defer to her husband in every possible respect. She must make the marital home pleasant for him. She must cook the meals, wash the dishes and take care of the children. She must never enquire about money and she must acquiesce to her husband's every demand. But what happens when the old customs lose their power and the woman no longer believes her life should be determined in this narrow fashion? This prospect is the underlying theme of Manju Kapur's absorbing second novel, *A Married Woman*, in which her lead protagonist, Astha Vadera, undergoes profound changes against the backdrop of an India that is also evolving. There is a shift in values and women have started acknowledging themselves the co-equals of men. Though the high hopes of Feminism have been washed away in the present social milieu, the relationship between man and woman becomes one of structured interdependence. But still the woman has to work for her liberation without resigning herself to her destiny. Gender equality still remains a myth.

The portrayal of woman in Indian English fiction as the silent sufferer and upholder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society has undergone a tremendous change and is no longer presented as a passive character. Novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande have portrayed woman as an individual rebelling against the traditional role, breaking the silence of suffering, trying to move out of the caged existence and asserting the individual self. This woman is trying to be herself and yet does not wish to break up the family ties. Since *Gandhiji* helped the women to cross the threshold of family life and move out into the outer world of freedom struggle and social reform, the women today are presented with varied opportunities. Her writing in 1998, Manju Kapur, in her novels presents women who try to establish their own identity. The women of India have indeed achieved their success in half a century of Independence, but if there is to be a true female independence, much remains to be done. The fight for autonomy remains unfinished combat in her quest for identity.

The phrase 'new woman' was coined originally by Henry James and intended by him to characterize American expatriates living in Europe. Women of affluence and sensitivity exhibited an independent spirit and were accustomed to acting on their own. The socio-political

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and economic forces brought about awareness in women who took up the new roles in the social, political and economic life. The New Woman was a feminist ideal that emerged in the late nineteenth century and had a profound influence on feminism well into the twentieth century. The term 'New Woman' was coined by writer Sarah Grand in her article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" published in the *North American Review* in March 1894. The term was further popularized by British-American writer Henry James, to describe the growth in the number of feminist, educated, independent career women in Europe and the United States. The New Woman pushed the limits set by male-dominated society.

Manju Kapur's novels present the changing image of women, moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring women, self-sacrificing women towards self-assured, assertive and ambitious women, making society aware of their demands and in this way providing a medium of self-expression.

A Married Woman

Manju Kapur's second novel *A Married Woman* is the story of Astha an educated, upper-middle-class, working Delhi woman. Through her novel *A Married Woman*, Kapur fully strives to undo this titled and distorted image of women whose cries for freedom and equality have gone and still go unheard in the patriarchal world. Thus denied the freedom to act and choose on their own, women remain solely inside the field of vision, mere illusion to be dreamt and cherished. This novel offers a fascinating glimpse into the workings of a woman's mind as she struggles to come to terms with her identity in the society. Astha is such a person who is in search of her identity and the one who could be helpful to her in her pursuit. She forges many relationships with different persons.

She represents the whole woman race, the changing Indian society where the upper-middle-class educated woman who, although financially independent, is still facing the problems of adjustment between the old and the new, between appearance and reality and between theory and practice. It explores the space of such women through Astha and boldly presents a new perspective. (Gunjan 97)

Manju Kapur builds the story on the concept that women of the present day society stand on the threshold of social change in an unenviable position. This novel gives voice to women's frustrations, disappointment, and alienation in a patriarchal world. It is a novel which provokes our thoughts as to how Astha, a married woman in search of her identity, registers her protests against existing patriarchal set up and emerges as an independent woman. Amar Nath Prasad observes in this context: "Women are no longer flowers of the pot for only decoration; rather they are fragrant flowers of the open garden diffusing aroma to all comers, braving the storms and rains" (qtd. in Gunjan 98).

Astha is chained by her middle-class values where she wants to uplift herself to upper-class, but is always afraid of failing down to lower class. Her first encounter with Bunty and then with Rohan, fails because of her middle-class status and she accepts her fate and goes for arranged marriages where she plays the role of a typical Indian housewife but very soon gets frustrated in waiting for her husband after the work and taking care of children and in-laws. Astha is born and brought up in a traditional middle-class family. Her parents are very conscious of her needs and role in a middle-class family. Her mother is very protective of her and she expects her to conform to traditions. She often tells Astha that "The real meaning and worth of a woman lies in getting married happily and having children and serving husband as a god" (Kavita 75). She tells Astha: "When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?" (AMW 1). It is important to note that Manju Kapur allows the patriarchy to operate through the mother.

Brought up in such an atmosphere Astha "was well trained on a diet of mushy novels and thoughts of marriage" (AMW 8), which give her the wings to search for a boy friend. Bunty is the first object of her crush. "Away from him her eyes felt dry and empty. Her ears only registered the sounds of his voice. Her mind refused to take seriously anything that was not his face, his body, his feet, his hands, his clothes..." (AMW 8-9).

Astha remains absorbed all the time in thinking about him and begins to perceive her future in him. She has to start a different life after her marriage with Hemant. Thinking of

achieving her true soul-mate, Astha felt complete in the role of an ideal wife and ideal daughter-in-law. Astha's marital life was unexpectedly good, full of love and passion and she felt her husband to be the best person in the whole world, so much so that she kept hidden her thought that "she longed to dissolve herself in him, longed to be sips of water he drank, longed to be the morsels of food he swallowed" (AMW 46). Her mental state reveals the psychology of a typical Indian girl for whom a happy marriage happens to be the greatest achievement in life.

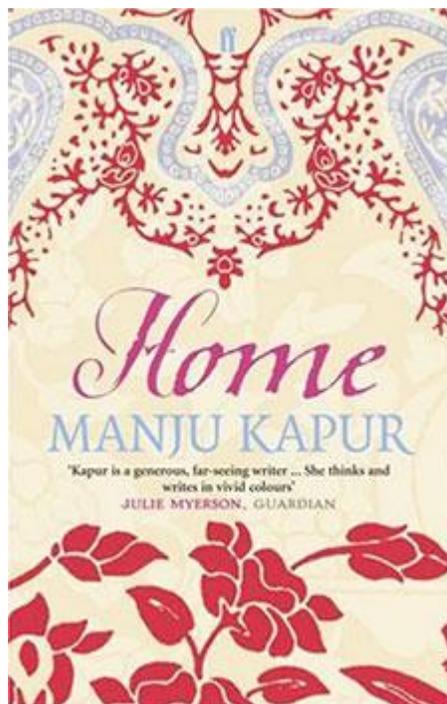
Astha does not realize that a man could not always love. Deliberately she lets herself being treated as a tamed pet rather than an individual woman with self respect whose involvement with the outside world is as important as her man's. She did not mind him ignoring her discussion of her job with him, for she was just living to enjoy the full bliss of her conjugal life. It was the central thing in her life. So far her husband loved and so far her corporal lust was satisfied, she would not consider anything else. In marriage the woman is always subjugated when it comes to the call of the flesh and blood. Like a common woman, Astha limits her world to her room where she enjoyed the bliss and for which she waited throughout the day even while working in the school or at home.

The denial of dignity and the blame of being irresponsible towards her family kept Astha in perpetual mental turmoil, which goes parallel to the political and religious turmoil nation-wide. It is in this scenario that Astha meets Pipeelika Trivedi. The feeling of betrayal on discovering the traces of her husband's infidelity in his tour luggage made Astha justify her own relation with Pipee. Her closeness to Pipee made Astha communicate with her very easily and on all levels. She felt comfortable in her relation with Pipee and no one suspected their relation. While she is with Pipee, she worries about the children and wonders how they would be managing without her. Astha's search for soul-mate finally culminated in Pipee. She thought that if husband and wife are one person, then Pipee and she were even more so. She had shared parts of herself she had never shared before. "Both forget their personal anguish and agony. Both gain inner strength from women's liberation. Both fulfill female bonding in passionate fantasies and love making" (Velmani 19). She felt complete with her.

Although Astha finds herself trapped between the pressures of family life and social norms, she makes daring decision about her life. The novel ends on a note of conclusive compromise as the two women find their own ways, knowing they cannot have a future together. In depicting the inner subtlety a of woman’s mind, Kapur displays a mature understanding of the female psyche.

Discovery of Self in Manju Kapur’s *Home*

Manju Kapur’s *Home* summarizes the idea of women’s liberation and the protagonist Nisha emerges as a new woman in the novel. Earlier in various socio-cultural situations, women were discriminated more on the bias of sex. Hence Manju Kapur mentions: “This is the life of a woman: to look after her home, her husband, her children and give them food she has cooked with her own hands” (H 126). This has been in practice with women as their duties to owe domesticity under the pressure of patriarchal notions and controls. Betty Friedan views that for woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment – the autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization – is as important as the sexual need.



As Nisha is *mangli*, and destined to match her horoscope with a similar *mangli*, she should wait unless a *mangli* could find. Ultimately Nisha is at the centre of interest with an issue

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of her college education. After some days of being admitted into the college, Nisha came in contact with Suresh, an engineering student. It was a turning point in her life. Kapur observes that Nisha returned to college “feeling adventurous, daring and modern. For the first time she had interacted socially with an unrelated male” (H 144). In course of time both Suresh and Nisha developed their relationship.

Nisha has truthful understanding about ‘personal worth’, ‘the pure mind’ and ‘the feelings of the heart’, but such ideas are against the traditional patriarchal system. As an enlightened new woman, Nisha is at the crossroads of modernity and tradition. She is now in a dilemma to choose between “an outsider and family, modernity and custom, independence and community” (H 149). She understands very well that neither her family nor the existing social customs would give her a clean check in respect of her courtship and ultimate aim of getting married to her lover. It is simply a challenge to the male authority and patriarchal symbolic order. She cannot have choice but to accept what is thrust upon her. Nisha now suspects if Suresh is an “eternal fucker”, a coward and a hypocrite. Next moment she realizes that such an arranged conversation in her interest is rather farce. She will never know “what force, money and threats” (H 204) have been used to make Suresh behave in the manner he is behaving now. However, Nisha blames Suresh for not being firm in his convictions at this juncture.

Now Suresh vanishes from her life and there is nothing she can do. She just leaves her fate in the hands of her parents ‘becoming a bird in a cage’ and to adjust with the idea of another man in place of Suresh. Here starts the discussion regarding her marriage issue all around. She feels torturous about viewing process. In her attempts to survive, she wants to do something meaningful. Here, as a new woman Nisha appears to be self-assured and confident. She dares to pronounce her decision and conviction. Yashpal manages to arrange a place for work and twenty-five thousand rupees to start her business on condition of return. He trusts her without making difference between his son and daughter. Both are treated equally. This lays an emphasis on equality portrayal of Nisha.

Nisha arranges tailor masterji Mohseen Khan and assigns important issues with Rupa Masi. Her father suggests call her line, ‘Nisha’s Creation’. As a responsible working

businesswoman, she pays her attention at the quality of dress, which paves way for the latter advancement of settlement in the Ready Made Cloth Market. Within a year, she repays half the twenty-five thousand loan. Pooja also offers her help. Being a businesswoman, Nisha tackles every problem on her own. “Economic independence opens for her doors of happiness” (Phogat 66). Meanwhile the family pundit predicts that she will make good marriage soon. At last Nisha is shown a picture of a widower in his early thirties, the similar mangli named Arvind, who wants to meet her. She is going to come in her ‘Creation’ every single day. She has something in her mind to say to the groom. She says her mother, “If I am going to marry him I should be able to say what I like” (H 299). This shows that she no more wants to be a mere sexual object. She reveals her freedom in the meeting with Arvind.

Nisha does not want to trap her entire life at home. So she puts forward her single condition to her groom that she should have freedom to run her business even after their marriage. After ten months of her marriage, she gives birth to twins – one girl and one boy. She feels that God has shown mercy on her and now her duty is over. Kakar says, “It is in her motherhood that her society and culture confines to her status as a renewer of the race and extends to her a respect and consideration which were not accorded to her as a mere wife” (Sharma 66) She feels fully relaxed at the end of the novel, having been surrounded by her near and dear ones that “All mine, she thought, all mine” (H 336). This exquisite exclamation of Nisha is similar to Nissim Ezekiel’s remarks about ‘home’ that “Home is where we have to gather grace” (qtd. in Dwivedi 41). Now in the midst of her family, in her own home, she, while playing the roles of daughter-in-law, wife and mother, is very happy and satisfied.

Manju Kapur’s Basic Approach to Woman’s Life

Manju Kapur’s basic approach to woman’s life in her novels is to liberate them from the oppressive measures of patriarchal symbolic order. In the process, the protagonists in her novels have sustained a lot of physical, emotional and psychological sufferings. These women have however achieved their long sought freedom to a certain extent. The purpose of this study is to analyze issues related to the middle class or upper middle class women. This study is based on two widely read novels of Manju Kapur- *Married Woman* and *Home*. The women’s question today is, therefore, no longer an issue confined to the position of women within the family or

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their rights to equality with men in different aspects of social life, it is part of the total, far broader question regarding the direction of change that our society is taking - economic, social, political, and the intellectual perception and analysis of that process. It is in this context that the role of women is discussed in the novels of Manju Kapur. The idea that all women were meant to get married and be submissive to their husbands was given a second look when we read the novels of Manju Kapur.

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