

Assessment of Feminine Issues in Manju Kapur's Novels

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Abstract

Manju Kapur's fictions portray women characters as fighting for their rights in a society which insists on traditions and customs. The advancement of education, urbanization, science and technology has played a major role in development of conscience of Indian women and due to this they appear modern and rebellious in their way of living. They exhibit a tendency that is not actually against tradition but in the course of search for identity and independence, they indirectly appear as rejecting the customs and traditions. Hence the women characters of Manju Kapur are more concerned about their lives, beliefs and roles in Indian society which is basically established on powerful tracks of patriarchal notions. Manju Kapur's modern women are no longer submissive, trained and obedient living beings like the first-generation women. They come out as social rebels as they question the set roles for women primarily decided by male in the society. Thus, indirectly they challenge the authority of man in taking decisions for the other gender.

Key words: Manju Kapur's Novels, Man-Woman Relationship, Familial Duties, Male Hegemony, Forbidden Spheres, Social Norms, Rebellion, Modern Woman, Self-Exploration, Quest for Identity

Introduction

Each and every society has its own set customs and norms. Man and woman are the basic two gender components of any society. Man is stronger in terms of body compared to woman who is delicate and soft. Man-woman relationship, set norms, and their roles indicate a long history in human society. Being physically strong, man was supposed proper as a bread-earner for the family and gradually he acquired superior status over woman in family and society. Woman, being delicate, was thought and believed ideal for familial duties and so was compelled to engage in household chores and fulfill other duties like upbringing of children, looking after husband, his family etc. This gender-based arrangement got accepted gradually in society which created conventional norms to follow for the women in long run.

The whole issue focuses on man-woman relationship. The marriage pattern itself signifies male dominance over woman. As per the social tradition, after marriage the bride leaves her parental home and goes to her husband's house. This is common and accepted in almost all the societies in the world. Then married woman is expected to adjust into the in-law's family. It is she who accepts, adjusts and follows the norms and customs of husband's family. Man remains in the protective mode, earning livelihood for the family, and woman keeps herself engaged and shut in the familial duties of children and husband. She hardly finds any room for herself, for her desires and opinions. In this situation, actually she is not believed to have her own opinions. What is expected from her is only acceptance, adjustment and agreement. Thus, social and family life in India is a real reflection of male hegemony.

The effect of patriarchy over woman's personality is effectively presented by Tummala Sai Mamata in "Understanding the Inner Interwoven World of Indian Women through the Characters of Manju Kapur's Selected Novels". She questions:

Why are Indian women the way they are? Why, despite everything do we find so much of ourselves mysterious? Where does the dependence, the longing for intimacy, the passivity come from? Does a woman's relationship with her mother- that first binding relationship with her mother- become the model for so much of our adult relationships with men- create fetters, constrain our sexuality, our independence, our very self-hood?

Manju Kapur's women characters are no more submissive to traditional norms and social conventions. They are the social rebels who raise their voice against the injustice to women. They are the independent human beings who prefer the feel of freedom. They exhibit a passion to cross the patriarchal threshold and achieve the fundamental rights which can't be denied to women in terms of equality. It is seen that throughout their life they are reminded of importance of man in a woman's life. Almost in all the novels of Manju Kapur, marriage has been a

significant social institute and women are shown bound to engage in it. Thus, Kapur's novels represent a sarcastic remark regarding women's predicament that even in this advanced scientific era, Indian women are still enforced to follow age-old customs and traditions. They are still expected to give priority to marriage, family and children.

The issues that are highlighted in *Difficult Daughters* are quest for identity, desire for independence, emergence of modern woman having modern approach and rebellion against tradition. The protagonist whom we encounter in this fiction is a woman of new India, unconventional in thoughts and full of zeal for freedom in life. She appears claiming her full control and rights over her life. Dr. Arpita Ghosh meaningfully explains the represented feminine issues and the central theme of *Difficult Daughters* in "Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters: A Saga of Partitioned Self*". She says:

Manju Kapur articulates the nature of female desire in *Difficult Daughters*. She subverts the rigid social gender norms and explores her protagonist's struggle for self-identity and self-determination. The novel is set mainly in pre-partition Punjab. It foregrounds the story of Virmati, a young woman who dares to resist patriarchy and suffers for her transgressions as a consequence. The national-political events of fighting colonialism are reflected in the enthusiastic young women who are seen defying the colonization of their own "self". Virmati is one of them. Thus, the impact of the national struggle cannot be relegated. The young generation motivated by freedom struggle seeks out ways for individual freedom as well. Independence for a girl meant resistance to the powerful patriarchy. The pioneering mood of the nationalist movement and the ideas of women's education provided an impetus to independent thinking.

The result that Virmati gets for pursuit of independence is not more than social and familial boycott. Her family members completely cut off all the relations with Virmati. And on the other hand, she is not accepted and welcomed in Harish's house as his second wife. The agony of the issue can be imagined easily in case of a woman who is sexually used by her lover for more than five years without marrying her and finally he marries secretly without giving her a rightful status of a legitimate wife. Virmati's lover, Harish neither divorces his wife Ganga nor leaves Virmati. Virmati's realization of her blunder is nicely depicted by the novelist. The novelist writes:

Virmati was tired and depressed. Now that she was actually in Harish's house for the first time, she could see it was going to be difficult to live separately from everybody else. Where would she sleep? How would they manage? *Gandi*, wicked, go away, that is what the little boy had said. She looked at Harish, her

brow wrinkled with unhappiness...I should never have married you,' she said slowly, 'and it's too late now. I've never seen it so clearly. It's not fair.' She faltered and stopped. (*Difficult Daughters* 212)

Virmati's piteous condition is accentuated when no one talks to her even when she attends her father's death rituals. She gets hurt when she is not informed and invited to her brother's marriage. The first meeting of mother and daughter after Virmati's marriage represents Kasturi's anger and Virmati's repentance over going against family. The narrator writes:

'Get out of here! Why bother to come now?' Kasturi's harsh words hit Virmati, and she bent her head, hoping this was just the initial reaction, her mother was understandably hurt.

'Didn't you hear me?'

Virmati remained standing. Kasturi came closer.

It would have been better if you had drowned in the canal than live to disgrace us like this!

'Mati – Mati -' choked Virmati. 'I shouldn't have-' (*Difficult Daughters* 220)

Manju Kapur's second novel *A Married Woman* represents the protagonist Astha's anguish and agony of her married life. The issue that is raised here by the novelist is the bondage of conventional marriage. Astha is presented as a traditional rebel who revolts against society. Even after having an earning husband and two children she feels her life incomplete. She doesn't keep herself confined in the house and engages in social movements. In the true sense, Astha is a new woman who needs recognition of her emotions and spirituality. Astha doesn't want to be identified only as a housewife and a caretaker of children. She feels herself a woman in search of identity. For her emotional fulfillment she doesn't hesitate to engage in lesbian relationship with her friend Pipeelika. R. Jagatheeswari properly explains Astha's predicament in "The Image of New Woman in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* and *Home*." She says:

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.

The major concern that is seen in Manju Kapur's *Home* is its social background wherein the protagonist Nisha is depicted as a trend setter in a traditional family. She is presented by the novelist as a woman having independent thinking and eagerness to achieve her goals. The fiction

depicts a typical middle-class family and the women are presented struggling hard against the set traditions and customs. Kapur's novels evidently present that a woman is denied freedom right from her home. She is trained and taught what a girl can do and what she can't. Right from the beginning of her life she is acquainted about the Dos and Don'ts of a woman's life.

In the traditional Indian society women are denied entering the forbidden areas and along with they are also trained to realize that there is nothing like forbidden for men. This gender partiality is challenged in Kapur's novels. Kapur's women characters initially face the patriarchal hurdles but firmly they oppose the gender discrimination and treat themselves as free and independent just like men. Thus, Kapur's protagonists come across the binding traditional norms, but instead of surrendering to male hegemony, they prefer to be trend setters and enjoy the rights and liberty allowed to them by the Creator. But in the due course of this struggle, they only get alienation, separation and boycott. They don't find any moral support during their pursuit of identity and independence. As a result, they appear alienated and sometimes society and family treat them as social criminals when they enter the forbidden spheres like extra-marital relationship, lesbianism etc.

The feminine issues that generate in *The Immigrant* are marriage as a compulsion and incompatibility of marriage that results into extra-marital affairs. Nina is the protagonist in the novel who is a well-educated woman and is having a respectable job of professor of English in Miranda House, Delhi. Nina is thirty years of age and in spite of her daughter's economically stable and comfortable life, Nina's mother gets much worried about her marriage. Priority to marriage or in broader sense it can be said that compulsion of marriage is one of the dominating themes of this fiction. Nina is enforced frequently by her mother to get married at the earliest since she is already thirty and crossed the marriage age.

In pursuit of a happy marriage life, Nina marries Anand who is a dentist in Canada. The couple begins their marital life in Canada but after the initial years their marriage turns into a failure as Anand suffers from pre-mature ejaculation. He can't give marital and sexual satisfaction to Nina. Because of Anand's physical abnormality, Nina can't conceive. Thus, two major problems that arise in Nina's life are marital void due to Anand's physical defect and consequent alienation in a foreign country. Motherhood is a fundamental and natural desire of any woman after marriage. It can be delayed for several years but not for the rest of the life. Unavailability of a child after marriage develops a marital void in a woman's life which is very hard to endure. Additionally, Anand is deeply affected by pre-mature ejaculation which keeps him mentally disturbed. Incapability of producing child and physical dissatisfaction lead to incompatibility of marriage that ultimately results in extra-marital affairs. Both, Anand and Nina, engage in extra-marital relationship in search of mental and physical satisfaction. Thus, the novel

deals with marriage complications which provoke the husband and wife to proceed towards forbidden relations.

T. Sri Devi in her article “Nina - An Epitome of Emancipation-A Study of Manju Kapur’s *The Immigrant*” rightly explains the new avatar of modern woman who has liberated herself from the patriarchal dominance and lives an autonomous life. She says:

She (Nina) has liberated herself from the patriarchal constraints and gets the ability to choose her own career through education, the ability to decide whether she wants to have children, her sexual freedom, her change in dress and image, and eventually her decision to leave her male partners. Thus, Nina becomes the epitome of emancipated Indian women who are now portrayed as more assertive, more liberated in their views, and more articulate in their expressions than the women of the past. Instead of downgrading the elements of suffering at the hands of her lover or husband or man, she has started asserting her substantive identity in action, not in words.

Manju Kapur’s fifth novel *Custody* represents the familial issues like marriage, husband – wife relations and motherhood. Kapur has remarkably well depicted the families in her novels. The major women characters in Kapur’s novels are in dilemma between their domestic duties and their desire for independent life. This is also evident in *Custody*. The beautiful and attractive protagonist of the novel, Shagun, is indecisive between her children and her desire to lead a free life. After getting separated from Raman, she wants to marry Ashok who shows a positive recognition for her beauty and does not apply any familial or social restrictions. Shagun wants to marry Ashok but she can’t bear the separation of her children. Her keen attachment with her children leads her to fight for their custody. Thus, the fiction not only portrays a vivid example of legal fight and separation of a couple but also its consequent effects on children. Shagun’s life turns miserable because after facing long court trials at the end she loses the custody of Roohi. She settles down in USA with Ashok, but the absence of her children finally makes her life traumatic in the foreign country.

The other issue of women’s life is brought forward too by the novelist. That is about Ishita’s barrenness. Ishita is another woman in the novel who is abandoned by her husband because of infertility. Infertility, which is a major reason for separation of married couples in India, is effectively mentioned in the fiction. Ishita is fortunate enough to find a proper match in the novel but there are thousands of women in India who are renounced on basis of barrenness. Incapability in reproducing children is a biological defect and women must not be claimed responsible for. But in the male dominated Indian family, it is only woman who suffers due to this issue. In *Custody* Raman marries Ishita who treats her stepdaughter Roohi just like her own

daughter. The real mother Shagun leaves her children whereas the stepmother Ishita loves and takes care of Raman's children wholeheartedly.

The pathetic condition of children who are torn apart due to legal trials of custody is aptly described by Poonam Rathee in "Gender and Generational Conflicts in Manju Kapur's Fiction." She writes:

Sufferings of children, clash of egos and delayed legal battle are focused throughout the novel. The title of the novel itself depicts the battle for guardianship issue and a mental agony and its aftermath on the children. The legal battle of bereaved custody leads the innocent children to suffer the harsh consequences of parents' divorce. The emotional and legal difficulties of custody cases are presented with acute sense of conflict and its pinching effects on children.

Poonam Rathee rightly explains the issue of barrenness. She says:

Custody very clearly conveys the message that a barren woman has to be honored and respected as she is also eligible to possess all rights of a woman. *Custody* proves to be a book that is torn between the old and the new perception of life. The question it raises is whether, the modern ideology is harming the base of the Indian society i.e. the love and respect for the family.

Manju Kapur's fictions capture variety of issues that women encounter in society and family. Family is at the center in almost all her novels. The plot and subsequent development of the events are interwoven around the family life. Kapur's novels represent Indian social background and so it is an authentic representation of Indian family and Indian women.

Conclusion

The feminine issue that appears in *Difficult Daughters* is enforcement for early arranged marriage which Virmati rebels against. The second issue which highlights in the novel is validity of marriage to a married man who is already living with his mother, wife and children. *Difficult Daughters* is also about love affair of a young girl of seventeen years. The major concern that appears in *A Married Woman* is the issue of lesbian relation. The physical relationship between women is barred as per social conventions and norms. Astha enters into this forbidden path. The prime issue which appears in *Home* is the conventionality as a major hindrance in woman's life. Nina, in *The Immigrant*, engages into extra-marital relationship with Anton which is the result of incompatibility of her marriage with Anand. Enforcement for marriage also appears another main issue in the novel. In *Custody*, the legal fight for divorce and custody of the children is

shown as the foremost theme. Modern woman Shagun does not hesitate to involve in extra-marital affair. Thus, Kapur's women characters are revolting and modern in their approach. They are no longer afraid and timid to fulfill their desires but are modern and revolutionary in their approach. They exhibit a tendency of snatching out one's right if it is denied under false notions.

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