

THE EMERGING PICTURE OF THE INDIAN WOMAN AS IDENTIFIED BY MANJU KAPUR

¹Ajaz Ahmad Bhat, ²Dr. Alka Gopal
¹Research Scholar, ²Professor of English
¹Department of English
¹Barkatullah University, Bhopal M.P, India

Abstract: Woman has been the focus of many literary works down the centuries. In an age of development and flux in every field, one cannot easily ignore half the population. Indian writers in English have also come out of their cocoons of “non-attachment” and have started acknowledging the status of the Indian woman in a male-dominated society. The concept of Indian womanhood is as divergent as the country itself and has undergone drastic and dramatic changes from era to era. India has travelled from her glorious past to degeneration; from spiritual ascendancy to communal clashes; from captivity to independence; from agrarian revolution to cyber technology. The image of Indian woman in the writings of Indian women novelists is a burning issue in today’s literary and feminist world. It is genuine fact that the exploitation of women in India is based on caste, class and patriarchal social set-up. The Indian woman has been exploited since ancient civilization to till today. However, in every period there was protest to such gender discrimination by contemporary social activists and reformers. The portrayal of women in Indian English fiction as the silent victim 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. We see the emergence of new women in Manju Kapur’s heroines who do not want to be the rubber dolls for other to move as they will; finding patriarchal notion that enforce women towards domestic life, they assert their individuality and aspire self-reliance through education.

Keywords: Exploitation, Discrimination, Tradition, Patriarchal, Emergence, Self-reliance.

I. Introduction

Manju Kapur highlights those issues of feminism that are endemic in India in order to help us understand how difficult it is for women here to arrive at an evolved state of mind being trapped within the matrix of religion and tradition. Her novels manifest women’s struggle for emancipation from economic, political and social bondages. She has tried to evolve her own stream of emergence of new women grounded in reality. Manju Kapur’s all five novels have different themes but deal with the typical middle class dreams, hopes and aspirations. The background of these novels is urban in nature and catches the city life with ironical detachments. The various consequences of changing human relationship between men and women have been represented with detail and graphic observation in all her novels. She shows her deep insight in telling the tales of common people in daily life. There is a unique tone of experience in the so-called journey in this world. Traditions, conventions and customs all these things are linked with a unique sense of freedom which has been recognized as the essence of modernity. According to K.K. Singh, “Compassion, sympathy, sacrifices and cultural loads are linked with womanhood. Kapur’s unique sense of feminism in her novels is well displayed in outstanding manner. She presents human beings in the context of conflict; especially family conflict has been reorganized as the core issue of her novels.”¹

In her all novels, Manju Kapur seems to be always dealing with family as the central issue. Her novels are the tales of the people living in the family. Family teaches them to understand human relationship which is the essence of the continuity of human existence. Family is the source of developing strong relation in the sense of devotion, mutual understanding and respect to each other. The relationship between father and son, mother and son, mother and daughter, father and daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, man and woman, lover and beloved can easily be noticed everywhere in her novels right from the beginning to the last one.

Manju Kapur’s debut novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998) which won Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for the Eurasian region 1999 has attracted a lot of attention. Originally titled *Partition* it locates the life of Virmati against a backdrop of political happenings before and after partition. As such there is a tendency to categorize it as a partition novel. A category which calls to one’s mind a whole cluster of partition novels and which do not necessarily reflect upon the violence or communal conflict of the partition. But instead focus on the impact of dislocation, in both positive and negative terms, on gender issues, on the role education, religion, political upheaval played in effecting social change as well as the whole issue of female identity. One such novel written more than three decades before *Difficult Daughters* in Attia Husain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* which Mulk Raj Anand described as a novel which needs to be “distinguished from autobiography” primarily because of the way the author has handled her memories.

Manju Kapur, a noteworthy story teller who without linguistic jugglery and gimmickry presents the post-modern novel in a traditional narrative thread. “*Difficult Daughters*” manifests autobiographical data and dimension in its syntactic norms and nuances. The novelist herself asserts that “conflict between daughters and mother is inevitable and I suppose I was a difficult daughter. The

conflict carries on through generations because mothers want their daughter to be safe. We want them to make the right choices- 'right' in the sense that they are socially acceptable. My mother wanted me to be happily married; I want my daughters to have good jobs."²

Manju Kapur's all novels seem to analyze various problems in life faced by woman. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* seems to present the story of Virmati who faces much difficulty in handling her daughter in the right way. Like the modern women Virmati has courage to fight against male chauvinism for her right of education, right of choosing her mate in life and economic independence. Virmati symbolizes the changed mindset of Indian girls who want to decide their future and refuse to be treated like things. And her gathering voice symbolizes the freedom the females run after. Thus in *Virmati* we see the incipient 'New Women' who is conscious, introspective, educated and wants to carve out a life for her. Ashok Kumar comments, "A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas and marital bliss and the women's role at home is a central focus, it is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact."³

In *A Married Woman*, Manju Kapur sees the world from the woman's perspective and that is why in spite of several attempts she does not succeed in the marginalization of Astha. She retains her individuality right from the beginning of the life. She seems to be the representative of middle class educated women who bears the burden of cultural and moral loads all the time in the life, she symbolizes the struggle of the woman for the survival in the male-dominated society. Her love for economic independence is the real motive of the writer. Manju Kapur has continued with the theme of female struggle and her strive of breaking up of the shackles of cruel tradition. Her second novel, *A Married Woman* has created a sensation after its publication. Kumar, Satendra explains, "A *Married Woman* [2002] was the second novel by Manju Kapur once again underlining and articulating the central concerns of Indian woman. In this novel Astha, the young heroine, is the representative of the woman striving to gain their space in life and socio-cultural domains. Like *Difficult Daughters* [1998] the theme of patriarchal bondage runs deep in the story."⁴

Manju Kapur's writing style is mind blowing and soul shaking. The mind of the reader evokes against the plight and struggle of Indian woman. Her fiction tries to portray today's woman who has turned and thrown the mantle of tradition, culture identity and social customs. Most of her fiction takes shape in the family background; Maneeta, Kohlon writes in one of the interviews with Jai Arjun she says, "Literature by women about families, always has these larger consideration, with years of studying texts, it becomes almost second nature to look beneath the surface at social and economic forces, gender relation- ships and how they are played out in an arena that, in my writing happens to be the home. But then all sort of things happening outside do affect what is happening inside the home."⁵

Manju Kapur stands as a voice of women through her feminist writings, presents character of Nina in *The Immigrant* who strives for her own liberation and attains a voyage of self-identity in the foreign country, Canada. Her failure in a love affair obligates her to live lonely in Delhi. Nina has to marry with an NRI dentist living in Canada. Nina, who is born and brought up in Indian culture shifts to Canada with her husband where she becomes unsuccessful to cope up with the Culture of Canada. In short, Nina fails into the dilemma of her traditional mindset of Indian middle class society and her solitude, disappointment growing into the western culture. Nina, the central character of this novel, shifts to Halifax, Canada, after marrying Ananda, who is a dentist by profession. She has to resign her job of lecturer in Delhi which is in true sense, her loss of individuality. Nina's educational qualification proves to be worthless in Canada which entraps her as unemployed. They even fail to produce a child which stands as a big reason for their broken relation. Though she is fond of reading books, she fails to escape from her feelings of alienation. Hence, she gets indulged into the dilemma of east and west.

Ananda labels her as "the perfect mix of east and west." Manju Kapur, too, writes that, "Her devotion to her mother and her willingness to consider an arranged introduction proved her Indian values, while her tastes, reading, thoughts, manner of speech and lack of sexual inhibition all revealed western influences. Due to her experiences as an immigrant, Nina learns the fact that east and west have tremendous differences which can't be equal. This fact ruins her dreams about a foreign country as well as married life. This is an ordinary picture of an immigrant who can be seen as alienated due to the entrapment of outlandish people and surroundings as well as new culture. Mahnaz Afkhami rightly points out: "Along with the loss of their culture and home comes the loss of the traditional, patriarchal structures that limited their lives in their own land. Exile in its disruptiveness resembles a rebirth for the woman. The pain of breaking out of a cultural cocoon brings with it the possibility of an expanded universe and a freer, more independent self."⁶

Manju Kapur is a prolific writer from India. All her novels focus on the life of female characters. Her protagonists struggle for their individual identity in the patriarchal set up. Her novels reveal the lives of women describing their struggle for basic rights, quest for identity and survival. In the last novel *Custody*, Manju Kapur tries to present man-woman and husband-wife relationship in terms of legal aspects. Her feminist stance is quite evident in this novel also because she analyzed the basic points of successful or unsuccessful relationship between man and woman with woman's perspective. A happy marriage demands total surrender and slavery of a woman. It is she who waits anxiously for the arrival of her husband with tears in her eyes. It is she who has to prove her chastity again and again. But now the spirit of a modern emancipated woman has changed a lot. Shagun, the protagonist of the novel *Custody* is bold enough to choose an epicurean life style in order to create her own space in the world, fearing no one. She is a middle class woman. She is the wife of Raman, a corporate advertiser. She is the mother of two children too. Feeling bored, alienated and attracted towards modernity, she develops an extra marital affair despite being a traditional housewife. Most of the women in India break their

marriage bond, in order to obtain their missed freedom. Here Shagun stakes the custody of her children at the cost of her freedom to marry Ashok. Arifa Akbar calls it as a gendered battle. According to her, “Kapur addresses the gendered nature of custody battles in India – men often refuse to grant divorce while women usually have greater claim to the children – but she refuses to generalize or moralize.”⁷

II. Conclusion

The women in the novels of Manju Kapur seem to be the personification of new women who have been carrying the burden of inhibition since ages and want to break that tradition of silence now. Manju Kapur’s female protagonists are the representative of that female folk who long to be free from the stale social customs and traditions but are never allowed. Her female protagonists are mostly educated. Their education leads them to independent thinking, for which their family and society becomes intolerant towards them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunge into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds.

III. Works Cited

1. Singh, K.K. “*Manju Kapur’s Home: Really a Kahani Ghar-Ghar Ki.*” A study in contemporary Indian English Novels .Jaipur: Book Enclave, 2013, p.126.
2. Bala, Suman and Subash Chandra. “*Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters: An absorbing tale of fact and fiction.*” 50 years of Indian writing. New Delhi: Edited by R. K. Dhawan, IAES, 1999. Print.
3. Kumar, Ashok. “*Novels of Manju Kapur: A feministic study.*” Eds. Rajput, Kalpana. The self-syndrome in the novels of Manju Kapur: yking Books, 2010, p.111.
4. Kumar, Satendra. “*Romance and Claustrophobia Amid the Chous of Family Voices.*” A study of Manju Kapur’s A Married woman in Rajput Kalpana. Remaping the female map: Jhumpa Lahiri and Manju Kapur. Jaipur: yking Books, 2012.
5. Kahlon, Maneeta. “*Family Structure in Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters and Home.*” IRWLE Vol. 7, No2, July 2011, Print.
6. Afkhami, Mahnaz. “*Woman in Exile.*” Virginia: University press of Virginia, 1994. P. 45.
7. Akbar, Arifa. “*Custody by Manju Kapur: A Review.*” The Independent.11 march 2011. Web.

